

Homiletics Analysis: Leviticus 26

Content & Intent

Broader Unit — Component of Leviticus as a Whole: Leviticus 26 functions as the covenant-closing chapter of the book, serving the same structural role that Deuteronomy 28–30 serves for the Mosaic corpus as a whole. Leviticus is not primarily a ritual manual; it is a covenant document. Its first twenty-five chapters establish how the holy God dwells among an unholy people through sacrifice, purity, and the priestly order. Chapter 26 is the covenant's formal ratification section — the blessings and curses that give the covenant its binding, legal weight. It cannot be understood apart from the covenant structure Leviticus has been building, but neither should it be dissolved into that structure. It stands as a complete address from God to His people, with its own argument, its own movement, and its own claim.

This Text — Content: Leviticus 26 opens with a brief restatement of the covenant's two non-negotiable prohibitions — no idols, no false worship — and the Sabbath command (vv. 1–2), which function as a heading reminding Israel what faithful covenant life looks like. God then presents two futures: the future of obedience (vv. 3–13) and the future of disobedience (vv. 14–46). The blessing section (vv. 3–13) unfolds in a single, cumulative movement — rain in its season, fertile land, peace, military victory, fruitfulness, God's walking among them, and the climactic declaration: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves." The curse section (vv. 14–39) is formally structured as four escalating cycles, each introduced by "if you walk contrary to me" or its equivalent, each followed by the threat of sevenfold intensification. The curses escalate from crop failure (vv. 14–17) to disease and drought (vv. 18–20) to wild animals and population collapse (vv. 21–22) to sword, plague, and desolation (vv. 23–26) to the final horror of siege, cannibalism, exile, and the land's desolation (vv. 27–39). But the chapter does not end there. Verses 40–46 constitute one of the most astonishing reversals in the Torah: after everything — after sevenfold discipline, after exile and desolation — if the people confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, and if their uncircumcised hearts are humbled, God will remember His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He will not destroy them. He will remember the land. He will remember the covenant.

This Text — Intent: God is not simply issuing a legal contract with attached penalties. Through this chapter, God is pressing His people to see two things simultaneously: the absolute seriousness of covenant fidelity and the absolute indestructibility of covenant grace. The blessing section is not bribery; it is a vision of what flourishing under God's rule actually looks like — shalom at every level of life. The curse section is not sadism; it is the natural and judicial consequence of choosing to walk "contrary" to the God whose very presence is life itself. The escalation of curses is not vindictiveness — it is the mercy of God who disciplines before He destroys, who sends four cycles of warning before the final

exile. And the restoration section (vv. 40–46) is not a footnote — it is the theological center of the chapter’s intent. God’s covenant cannot be voided by human unfaithfulness. His memory of the Abrahamic covenant is the ground of Israel’s survival. Through this chapter, God is seeking to produce in His people a sober, clear-eyed, humbled, and ultimately confident covenant posture: take the covenant seriously because God takes it seriously — and rest in the covenant’s ground because that ground is not human faithfulness but divine oath.

Subject Sentence: God binds His people to covenant blessings and curses, yet grounds their final hope in His own unbreakable oath.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to hold two things simultaneously — the full weight of covenant consequence and the full confidence of covenant grace — because the covenant’s ultimate ground is not their faithfulness but His sworn remembrance of Abraham. Neither presumption nor despair is a faithful response to this God; only sober trust in a God who disciplines without destroying and restores without excusing.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Structure and Purpose of the Curse Cycles: A significant interpretive question concerns whether the four escalating curse cycles function primarily as (a) predictive prophecy, (b) conditional warning intended to motivate obedience, (c) covenantal legal form, or (d) a theological account of God’s disciplinary patience. Dispensational readers have historically emphasized the predictive dimension, reading the curses as a detailed prophetic outline of Israel’s national history — the cycles correspond to specific periods of judgment culminating in the Babylonian exile and beyond. There is genuine exegetical insight here: the text’s historical fulfillment in the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles, and Israel’s later scatterings, is not coincidental and should not be minimized. However, reading the curses *primarily* as predictive prophecy risks flattening their immediate rhetorical and covenantal function. They are addressed to Israel standing at Sinai, and their primary force is prospective warning — *this is what disobedience leads to* — not prophetic calendar. The Reformed reading holds both: the curses are genuine conditional warnings rooted in covenantal legal form (ANE treaty structure), and they are also historically actualized in ways the text itself invites the reader to recognize in retrospect. Neither function cancels the other.

The Restoration Section (vv. 40–46) — Conditions or Grace? A second significant interpretive tension concerns whether verses 40–46 describe (a) conditional restoration dependent on Israel’s repentance, (b) unconditional restoration grounded solely in divine election and Abrahamic covenant, or (c) both in a particular relationship. Arminian and

some Baptist readers emphasize verse 40's conditional framing: "if they confess their iniquity..." — restoration is genuinely conditioned on repentance, meaning the covenant outcome is not fixed. This reading captures something the text genuinely requires: the confession is not cosmetic or hypothetical — it is real, and it is the occasion for God's remembrance. However, the Reformed reading does not dispute the reality of the condition; it asks what makes the condition possible. Verse 42 is striking: "then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac, and I will remember my covenant with Abraham." The triple invocation of the patriarchal covenant, and particularly verse 45's "I will remember in their favor the covenant with their forefathers" (*for their sake*) — suggests that the ultimate ground of restoration is not the quality of Israel's confession but God's own sworn oath to Abraham. The confession is the instrument through which God's remembrance is activated, but the basis of restoration is the prior and unilateral Abrahamic covenant. This is exactly Galatians 3 and Romans 11 territory, and the Reformed reading — consistent with Calvin, Kline, and Wenham — holds that the condition and the unconditional ground coexist: God's sovereign covenant memory produces the very repentance that activates the restoration promise.

The Idolatry Prohibition (vv. 1–2) as Heading: Some interpreters treat verses 1–2 as a legal preamble with minimal expository weight, merely recapitulating earlier law. A more careful reading recognizes that idolatry and Sabbath are placed at the chapter's opening as a diagnostic pair. Idolatry is a trust failure — worshiping what cannot save; Sabbath is a rhythm of dependence — ceasing from self-sufficiency on God's command. Placing these at the head of the covenant sanctions is not incidental. They diagnose the root of the covenant failure the curses address. The Reformed reading follows Calvin here: the curse section is not primarily about ritual or agricultural failure — it is about the progressive consequence of a broken trust relationship with the living God. Idolatry is the generator of the covenant-breaking that the curses address.

The "Walking Contrary" Language (vv. 21, 23, 27, 40): The Hebrew *qeri* (translated "contrary," "hostile," "in opposition") is unusual and debated. Some lexicographers derive it from a root meaning "to meet by chance" or "randomly," suggesting that Israel's rebellion is treating God's interventions as merely random occurrences — not covenant discipline. This is exegetically significant and should not be flattened into generic "disobedience." The Reformed reading follows Milgrom and Wenham in taking the *qeri* concept as deliberate opposition or studied indifference — an attitude of treating God's acts as coincidental rather than covenantal. This deepens the application: the covenant failure Israel is warned against is not merely behavioral sin but an epistemological and doxological failure — refusing to recognize God's hand in the events of life.

The Reformed Verdict: Leviticus 26 is best read as a formal covenant ratification section employing standard ANE treaty-curse structure, addressed immediately to Israel at Sinai but with transparent prophetic-historical force. Its dual movement — covenant consequence and covenant grace — is not a contradiction to be resolved but a tension to be inhabited. The curses are real, the escalation is real, the exile is real. And the Abrahamic covenant remains the ground of restoration — not because Israel's repentance earns it,

but because God swore an oath that no human faithlessness can void. This reading is confirmed by the New Testament's use of the passage (the exile-and-return pattern as the backstory to the gospel) and by Galatians 3, Romans 11, and Revelation 21 as the chapter's ultimate canonical resolution.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 15:1–21** — God's unilateral covenant with Abraham, sealed by divine oath alone when Abraham was asleep, is the Abrahamic covenant. Leviticus 26:42, 45 invokes it as the ground of restoration. The asymmetry of Genesis 15 (God walks through the pieces; Abraham does not) explains why Israel's unfaithfulness cannot void the covenant's ultimate purposes.
- **Deuteronomy 28–30** — The covenant sanctions of Deuteronomy parallel and expand Leviticus 26, culminating in Deuteronomy 30:1–10's restoration promise. Deuteronomy 30:6 — "the LORD your God will circumcise your heart" — makes explicit what Leviticus 26:41's "uncircumcised heart" implies: the very humbling required for restoration is itself a divine work, not a human precondition Israel can generate independently.
- **Jeremiah 31:31–34** — The new covenant promise responds directly to Israel's failure under the Mosaic covenant sanctions. The new covenant resolves the Leviticus 26 problem not by lowering the covenant standard but by internalizing it — God writes the law on the heart. The exile Leviticus 26 threatens is the precise historical context out of which Jeremiah 31 is spoken.
- **Romans 11:25–29** — Paul's argument that "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (v. 29) is the New Testament's most explicit affirmation of Leviticus 26:42–45's logic. God's memory of the Abrahamic covenant is not nullified by Israel's covenant failure. Paul reads the entire drama of Israel's hardening and restoration through exactly the covenant-consequence-and-covenant-grace framework that Leviticus 26 establishes.
- **Revelation 21:1–8** — The final vision of the new creation — "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man" — is the ultimate fulfillment of Leviticus 26:11–12's blessing promise: "I will make my dwelling among you...and I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people." What the covenant blessings point toward, the new creation delivers in full and final form.

Aim: To bring the reader to a place of clear-eyed, humbled, and confident covenant realism — neither presuming on God's grace nor despairing of it, but standing soberly in the full weight of both covenant consequence and covenant oath.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Covenant heading: no idols, no images, no false worship; keep the Sabbaths; reverence the sanctuary	These two commands function as the chapter’s diagnostic pair — idolatry (trust failure) and Sabbath (rhythm of dependence). Placed at the head of the sanctions as the root of all covenant faithfulness or failure.
3	Condition of blessing: “If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them...”	The single condition. The blessings that follow all hang on this.
4–5	Blessing 1: Rain in its season; the land yields fruit; threshing runs into vintage and vintage into sowing; the land’s abundance is complete and continuous	The economic and agricultural baseline of shalom — not mere survival but superabundance; one harvest running seamlessly into the next.
6–8	Blessing 2: Peace in the land; wild animals removed; no sword passes through; Israel lies down without fear; five chase a hundred and a hundred chase ten thousand	Security at every level — domestic, environmental, military. The contrast with the curse’s wild animals (v. 22) is deliberate.
9–10	Blessing 3: God turns toward Israel; Israel is fruitful and multiplies; old grain must be cleared to make room for the new	God’s personal attention (<i>pānāh</i> — to turn the face toward) — the relational core of the blessing. Abundance so complete that storage becomes a problem.
11–12	Blessing 4 — Climactic: God’s dwelling (mishkan) will be among them; He will walk among them; He will be their God; they shall be His people	The covenant formula in its fullest expression. This is not one blessing among others — it is the goal of all the others. God’s presence among His people is the

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13	Theological ground of the blessings: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves; I broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect”	substance of shalom. The Exodus is the covenant’s living foundation. God’s blessings are not new — they are the continuation of what He began at the Red Sea. Freedom from slavery is the prototype of every blessing.
14–17	Curse Cycle 1 (Condition: “if you will not listen to me...and will not do all these commandments”): Terror, disease, defeated by enemies, ruled by those who hate them, fleeing though none pursues	First-level covenant discipline. The consequences are social, military, and psychological — not yet catastrophic. God is beginning to address the rebellion.
18–20	Curse Cycle 2 (Condition: “if in spite of this you will not listen to me”): Sevenfold discipline; drought; heaven like iron, earth like bronze; strength spent in vain; the land yields nothing	The curse intensifies. The creation itself becomes hostile. The productive land — the gift of Canaan — is withdrawn. The promised abundance inverts.
21–22	Curse Cycle 3 (Condition: “if you walk contrary to me”): Sevenfold plague; wild animals among them; bereaving them of children, destroying livestock, making them few	Escalation to loss of life — children and livestock, the community’s future and its economic foundation. The blessing of security from wild animals (v. 6) is explicitly reversed.
23–26	Curse Cycle 4 (Condition: “if by this discipline you are not turned to me but walk contrary to me”): God Himself walks contrary to them; sword avenges; pestilence among them; bread rationed; ten women bake in one oven	God takes the language back — <i>He</i> now walks <i>contrary</i> . The sword, the plague, the broken bread-staff: covenant curses in the classical ANE treaty sense.
27–33	Curse Cycle 5 — Final	The ultimate covenant

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	(Condition: “if in spite of this you will not listen to me but walk contrary to me”): God’s full fury; siege cannibalism; high places destroyed; incense altars cut down; cities laid waste; Israel scattered among the nations	sanction: exile. The idolatrous worship places destroyed. The land emptied. The people scattered. Every blessing of chapters 3–13 is inverted with terrible precision.
34–39	The land’s Sabbath rest in Israel’s absence; the desolation of the scattered; they perish in enemy lands; they waste away for their own iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers	The land gets the Sabbath rest Israel refused to give it. The exile is not accidental — it is structurally tied to Israel’s covenant failure. Even the land participates in the covenant’s logic.
40–42	Turning point: “But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers...if then their uncircumcised heart is humbled...then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham”	The great reversal. Three conditions: confession, humbling, acceptance of guilt. But the content of God’s response is not conditioned renewal of the Mosaic covenant — it is <i>remembrance of the Abrahamic covenant</i> .
43–45	The land’s Sabbath must be satisfied; God will not utterly destroy them or break His covenant with them; He will remember them for the sake of the covenant with their forefathers whom He brought out of Egypt	The Abrahamic covenant (v. 42) and the Exodus covenant (v. 45) together constitute the indestructible ground of restoration. “For their sake” (<i>le-mā’an</i>) — God acts for the sake of the covenant, not Israel’s merit.
46	Closing colophon: “These are the statutes and rules and laws that the LORD made between himself and the people of Israel through Moses on Mount Sinai”	Leviticus closes. These are Sinai’s terms. The covenant is now on record. Both parties know what is at stake.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–2	The Covenant’s Diagnostic Heading: Idols, Images, and Sabbath
2	3–13	The Future of Faithfulness: Shalom from Ground to Dwelling
3	14–39	The Future of Rebellion: Five Cycles of Escalating Discipline
4	40–46	The Ground That Cannot Fail: Abrahamic Covenant as Final Hope

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God binds His people to covenant blessings and curses, yet grounds their final hope in His own unbreakable oath.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to hold two things simultaneously — the full weight of covenant consequence and the full confidence of covenant grace — because the covenant’s ultimate ground is not their faithfulness but His sworn remembrance of Abraham. Neither presumption nor despair is a faithful response to this God; only sober trust in a God who disciplines without destroying and restores without excusing.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] — Reframe what God’s discipline actually means. When God’s discipline comes — when the rain stops, when the plans collapse, when the community fractures — the temptation is to read these events as either random misfortune or divine abandonment. Leviticus 26 will not permit either reading. The escalating curse cycles describe a God who does not abandon His people to consequence but pursues them through consequence, pressing harder when they refuse to turn. The Hebrew *qeri* — “walking contrary” — names the precise failure: treating God’s interventions as coincidences rather than covenant communication. The congregation needs to be taught to read their own history covenantally, not randomly. What is God pressing you to see through what you have been calling bad luck?

2. [Affections/Worship] — Feel the full weight of what idolatry costs before you feel the comfort of grace. The chapter opens with the prohibition of idols (v. 1) and closes with

the memory of the Abrahamic covenant (v. 42) — and between those two poles lies everything the curse section describes. Idolatry is not a theological abstraction; in this chapter it is the first cause of a catastrophe that ends in siege cannibalism and exile. The congregation should be helped to feel what it means to exchange the God who walks among them (v. 12) for gods of stone and wood. The idol diagnosis here is not about literal carved images — it is about any object of ultimate trust that is not the LORD Himself. The appropriate response to this passage is not comfort but a holy sobriety — a grief at how much the exchange of God for lesser things actually costs.

3. [Will/Behavior] — Bring your actual failures before God in specific confession, not generic remorse. Verses 40–42 do not describe vague spiritual openness or a general sense of unworthiness. They describe confession of specific iniquity — their own and their fathers'. The uncircumcised heart is named and humbled. This is not performance; it is the precise instrument through which God's covenant remembrance is activated. The application is concrete: stop describing your spiritual condition in comfortable generalities ("I know I'm not perfect") and start naming what the text names. What specific covenant failures — broken trust, practical idolatry, refusal to rest in God — need to be brought before God by name?

4. [Mind/Belief] — Anchor your confidence in the Abrahamic covenant, not your spiritual track record. The restoration promise of verses 40–46 does not say God will restore Israel because they repented well enough. It says God will remember His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The ground of hope is not the quality of the confession but the permanence of the oath. Romans 11:29 says it plainly: the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable. For the believer who is haunted by the magnitude of past failure — who wonders whether the covenant can survive what they have done — this passage speaks a word that is not conditional on their performance: God's memory of His sworn oath does not depend on the consistency of your faithfulness. Your hope is not in yourself. It never was. It is in a God who swore to Abraham and has not forgotten.

5. [Affections/Worship] — Let the vision of God walking among His people become the organizing desire of your life. The climax of the blessing section is not abundance or safety or military victory — it is verse 12: "I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people." This is what shalom is for. All the rain and the harvests and the peace and the fruitfulness are the context in which God and His people dwell together. And this vision — God walking among His people — is the thread that runs from Leviticus 26:12 to Revelation 21:3 ("the dwelling place of God is with man"). Let this become the thing you want most. Not the blessings. The Blessor. Not the rain. The one who gives it. When this is your deep desire, covenant faithfulness is not a burden — it is the natural response of someone who knows what presence with God actually is.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Leviticus 26 teaches that God is the sovereign executor of His own covenant — He does not merely observe what happens when His people obey or disobey; He acts to bring the covenant's terms to bear on history. The chapter reveals a God of remarkable patience — four escalating cycles of discipline before the exile, each preceded by a condition and a sevenfold intensification, each a mercy that makes room for repentance before the full weight falls. It also teaches that God's character includes genuine covenant wrath — the curses are not rhetorical hyperbole but historical actualities, as the exile confirmed. Most profoundly, Leviticus 26 teaches the theological structure of covenant grace: the ultimate ground of God's covenant relationship with His people is not their faithfulness but His sworn oath to their fathers. God's remembrance of the Abrahamic covenant (vv. 42, 45) is not a loophole that excuses covenant failure — it is the bedrock that makes covenant restoration possible after the full weight of covenant consequence has fallen.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Leviticus 26 is one of the Old Testament's fullest displays of the covenant of grace operating through the Mosaic covenant administration. The Reformed tradition has consistently distinguished the Mosaic covenant as an administration of the covenant of grace (not a covenant of works) — and this chapter is the locus classicus for that distinction. The curses are real and their execution is real, but the final word is the Abrahamic covenant's irrevocability — which is the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the covenant community grounded in divine election and sworn oath, not human performance. The chapter also displays the Reformed understanding of repentance as divinely enabled (the “uncircumcised heart” that must be humbled, and Deuteronomy 30:6's later clarification that God Himself circumcises it) rather than a human precondition Israel generates independently. Leviticus 26 is the Old Testament's way of saying what Paul says in Romans 8:38–39 — nothing can separate God's covenant people from the love of God grounded in His sovereign purposes — while simultaneously being honest that the covenant sanctions are real, the discipline is real, and the obedient life is not optional.

Main Takeaway

God has told you exactly what covenant life looks like from both sides — the flourishing of walking with Him and the devastating consequence of walking away — and He has told you where the ground is when everything else has failed: not in your faithfulness, but in an oath He swore to Abraham before you were born and has not forgotten. Neither presume on it nor despair of it. Walk with this God in sober, clear-eyed trust — he disciplines before He

destroys and restores before He forgets — and let the thing you want most not be His blessings but His presence.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the chapter to a legal transaction and missing the relational core.** The most common misreading of Leviticus 26 treats it as a contract with attached penalties — obey and receive payment, disobey and receive fines. But the climax of the blessing section is not the agricultural abundance; it is verse 12: “I will walk among you.” And the horror of the curse section is not ultimately the famine or the exile; it is that Israel has traded the God who walks among them for gods of stone. The preacher who reduces this chapter to a behavioral cost-benefit analysis has missed its theological center. The covenant is a relationship, and the sanctions measure proximity to or distance from the God who is life itself.
- **Skipping or minimizing the restoration section as a minor appendix.** Verses 40–46 are not an afterthought. They are the theological center of the chapter’s intent. The curse section is longer and more dramatic, and it is tempting to let it carry the sermon. But a sermon on Leviticus 26 that does not land on the Abrahamic covenant as the indestructible ground of hope has preached the Law without the Gospel. The restoration section is not a soft landing after hard warnings — it is the revelation of who this God ultimately is.
- **Preaching the blessings as a prosperity formula.** Verses 3–13 describe the fullness of shalom under faithful covenant life. They should not be preached as a guaranteed individual formula (“obey and God will make you financially prosperous and physically healthy”). The blessings are covenant blessings addressed to the community of God’s people in their covenant land — they have a corporate and eschatological dimension that is flattened when they are privatized into personal prosperity promises. The New Testament’s application of these blessings is through union with Christ and the new creation, not through individual obedience generating personal material reward.
- **Treating the escalating curses as a prophetic calendar rather than a theology of disciplinary patience.** The four-cycle structure of escalating curses is theologically significant for what it reveals about God — He disciplines before He destroys, He warns before He acts, and He leaves room for repentance at every stage. Preaching this primarily as a predictive outline of Israelite history (Judges period, divided monarchy, Assyrian exile, Babylonian exile, etc.) is not wrong, but it risks missing the pastoral point: this is what it looks like when a patient God pursues a stubborn people through consequence before executing the final sanction. The applicational force is present-tense: God still disciplines before He destroys.

- **Leaving the idolatry heading (vv. 1–2) as mere legal preamble without diagnostic force.** The chapter’s placement of the idol prohibition and the Sabbath command at its head is intentional. These are not random opening commands — they are the root-level diagnosis of everything the curse section addresses. Idolatry is misplaced ultimate trust; Sabbath violation is the refusal to rest one’s existence in God. Both are covenant failures at the root level. The preacher should show the congregation that the curses of verses 14–39 are not arbitrary punishments but the logical consequences of exchanging the living God for substitutes and refusing to depend on Him. The idol diagnosis should be applied concretely to the contemporary congregation’s own objects of ultimate trust.
- **Missing the *qeri* (“walking contrary”) language as a key to the chapter’s spiritual diagnosis.** The phrase translated “walk contrary” or “hostile” or “in opposition” (Hebrew *qeri*) occurs five times in the chapter (vv. 21, 23, 24, 27, 28, 40, 41) and may carry the nuance of treating God’s acts as random or coincidental rather than covenantal. If this lexical analysis is adopted (following Milgrom), the spiritual failure the chapter addresses is not merely behavioral disobedience but an epistemological posture: refusing to see God’s hand in history. The practical application is that covenant rebellion often begins not with overt sin but with a slow drift into treating life’s events as random — luck, circumstance, coincidence — rather than as the acts of the covenant God who is always pressing His people toward Himself.