

ADULT QUARTERLY

EVIL MEN OF THE BIBLE

FALL QUARTER, 2012
SEPTEMBER
OCTOBER
NOVEMBER



Adult Quarterly

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Vol. 98, No. 4

ISSUED SEPTEMBER, 2012

FALL QUARTER

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EVIL MEN OF THE BIBLE

Quarterly Aim: The student will learn to beware of sin and to detect the wiles of the devil by examining the lives of some evil men of the Bible. This reminds us that sin has consequences.

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Cain—The Way that Leads to Death

APPLICATION

The lesson will show how disastrous it is to replace God's way with our way.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Genesis 4:3-12.

Related Scripture: Exodus 20:5; Psalm 16:11; Proverbs 4:23; 8:6; 14:11, 12; Jeremiah 6:16; 17:9; Matthew 7:13, 14; John 14:6; Hebrews 9:8.

Devotional Reading: The Fruits of Sin, James 1:15.

Introduction

The quarterly theme for this series is “Evil Men of the Bible.” One might easily understand the importance of positive examples of godly men and women who followed the leadership of God. They show people how to act in the midst of a wicked generation. But why is it valuable to see examples of men who strayed from the direction God would have them go? While positive reinforcement is a benefit to show the right direction of life, it is also beneficial to see what rebellion against God brings to life. The Bible teaches a principle: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Gal. 6:7). One's conduct results in certain consequences. If a person's behavior is in opposition to God, it will produce a crop of evil consequences. Jesus even taught the notion that a person's life bears fruit in connection to what is within the individual. “A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree

bring forth good fruit” (Matt. 7:18). Examining the lives of those who defied God teaches a lesson of behavior to avoid.

This lesson deals with a notorious character who lived early in history. Cain was the firstborn child of Adam and Eve. He was soon followed by Abel and other children. These children were raised and taught in much the same way. They would have been told about all that had happened in the Garden of Eden. The beautiful creation of a loving God and the provision of a forgiving God were part of that teaching. Adam showed by example how his children should conduct their worship of the Lord. He modeled such behavior in their presence. Through all their formative years, the children had seen their parents worship the God who had forgiven them.

The problem with Cain’s offering was not that he did not want to worship. Cain did not understand what the sacrifice was all about. In the New Testament, Cain’s offering was portrayed as a symbol of false religion (Jude 11). Through this we can see his misunderstanding of worship was equal to the false prophet, Balaam (Deut. 23:4), and the man who stood in opposition to Moses, Korah (Num. 16). The path Cain followed led to eternal separation from God. His false beliefs showed His rebellion against the Lord.

1. _____

Cain’s Offering Denied His Natural Sin

Since Cain had been raised at the knee of Adam, he had heard the story of the first sin. Adam had been created in innocence but had chosen to rebel against God by eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This was the one law God had given him. Yet, Adam could not keep that one law. As a result, his fellowship with the Creator had been broken and Adam was in a state of sinfulness. Since like begets like, that sinful man would only produce offspring who were like him. This meant that Cain was born a sinner. What does this condition mean?

God is completely holy. There is nothing about God that is sinful. If humans are natural sinners, they are in opposition to God and have no natural fellowship with Him. The apostle Paul described this enmity. “For what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what

part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?” (2 Cor. 6:14-16). People might want to claim some natural kinship with God, but the Scriptures are clear. All people are naturally separated from God. Yet, Cain denied the hostility between humanity and God. The biblical principle is that sin can only be forgiven through shed blood (Heb. 9:22). When Cain brought his offering of the fruit of the ground, it indicated there was already fellowship between him and God.

People today still fall into the same trap as Cain. They compare themselves with other people and think they come out looking good. If people only compare themselves to other people, this will always be the case. The standard of comparison is none other than Jesus Christ. This is why the Scriptures declare, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). The standard has been set. People might try to reach the standard, but all will fall short. The standard is the perfect, sinless Son of God. Only He can make the claim of being without sin. No matter what people think, all humans are natural sinners in need of a Savior. Cain denied his need and tried to satisfy God another way.

2. _____ **Cain’s Offering Implied People Could Work Their Way to God**

Since Cain was not satisfied with God’s plan, he decided to find another way. He was a farmer. The crops he planted grew beautifully and produced bountifully. It took much effort to cause those plants to grow, but it seems that Cain enjoyed the work. When his garden was harvested, Cain thought it would be good to show the results of his efforts to God. He brought a portion of his harvest to God. There seems to have been an element of pride in the gift Cain brought. He wanted to show off the works of his hands. Since this was the best of his crops, surely God would be satisfied with them. However, human efforts are never enough to satisfy the righteous demands of God.

Why are a person’s good works not enough to satisfy God? The answer to this question lies in what kind of works a person can produce. If the comparison is with the works of other people, then they might be sufficient. But God’s demands are far higher. Sin is so disgusting to God that He will not accept anything that

has the stain of sin on it. The best works a person can accomplish are polluted by sin. “All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6). Since sin is odious in the sight of God, and since the best works a person can accomplish are sinful, how can people assume they can gain eternal life by their efforts? One’s good works will not erase the stain of sin.

People still have the idea they can do enough good works to wash away their own sins. What this does is to exalt the individual rather than the Savior. If a person could gain eternal life by personal efforts, that individual would be able to brag on himself (Eph. 2:9). That is not what God desires. Only He is worthy of worship and honor. He is the Savior and should be the object of all praise.

3. _____ **God’s Rejection of Cain’s Offering**

When Cain brought his offering to God, he expected to receive approval of his gift. “But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect” (Gen. 4:5). This statement implies that God inspected the offering and found it lacking. It was not the offering God required. The first sacrifice happened when Adam and Eve had sinned. God killed animals and used the skins as garments for them (Gen. 3:21). That set a standard they were to follow, “Without shedding of blood is no remission” (Heb. 9:22). For a sacrifice to be pleasing to God, it had to be a blood sacrifice. Cain failed to understand this principle and determined to bring the fruits of his labors as an offering. God inspected the offering and found no blood sacrifice. It was rejected.

Cain’s response showed his heart. Rather than admitting his failure, Cain grew angry at God. The statement, *very wroth*, has the idea of blazing up in extreme anger. Even the expression on his face (his countenance) showed the anger rising within him. Cain thought God was required to accept his offering no matter what it was. Since God was not accommodating, Cain exploded with anger. Nothing can be hidden from God, but Cain’s expression revealed how bitter and hostile his heart was.

God did not leave Cain to wallow in his anger. He tried to reason with him and convince him of his need to repent. The Lord even warned Cain about what might happen if he maintained his bitter, angry spirit. “Sin lieth at the door” (Gen. 4:7). This phrase pictures a wild animal crouching to spring on its prey

without warning. Since Cain had such a bad attitude, an even greater sin was waiting to overtake him.

How people react when confronted with sin is amazing. Some people will realize their failure and will quickly seek God's forgiveness. King David was such a person. When he sinned and realized how he had failed God, he soon repented and asked God's forgiveness. Other people will swell up in anger and pride. "How dare you say I have done wrong!" Rather than admit sin, they make excuses or blame the act on someone else. Cain followed this latter action. He grew angry when God confronted him. If you grow angry when shown your errors and failures, maybe your attitude needs adjusting. There is no one who is without sin. We need to be willing to confess our sins to God and ask Him to forgive those sins.

Conclusion

Cain's angry attitude soon led him to another sinful act. He and his brother, Abel, were in the field. Cain was so angry with God that he took it out on Abel. He killed his brother because Abel's offering had been accepted by God. One sin led to another. This will always be the case. People must be careful to follow God's way for their lives. When we replace God's way with our way, it will always lead to disaster. Remember, Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Follow His way all your days.

Pharaoh—The Hard-hearted King

APPLICATION

The hard-heartedness of Pharaoh warns us how progressive hard-heartedness is and how it should be avoided from the beginning.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Exodus 1—12.

Related Scripture: Mark 3:1-5; 6:52; 8:17.

Devotional Reading: Hardness of Heart, Mark 4:4, 5.

Introduction

People are often forgetful. Good deeds are quickly forgotten. The story of Israel in Egypt began on positive terms. Joseph had been sold into slavery in Egypt. His faithfulness both to God and his masters caused Joseph to be well respected. He rose through the ranks. Because of his God-given ability to interpret dreams, Joseph had the opportunity to help Egypt. A terrible famine would come upon the nation, and without proper preparation, it would be totally ruined. Through Joseph's foresight and planning, Egypt remained secure and strong. Joseph had aided the nation greatly. Joseph brought his extended family to live in Egypt. The descendants of Jacob (Israel) were respected and had an honored place in the nation. One would naturally think that Egypt would be eternally grateful for the service of Joseph. However, people are often forgetful.

The narrative of Exodus shows what happened to change the fortunes of Israel. "Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph" (Ex. 1:8). Generations had passed and

there was a new outlook on outsiders. The new Egyptian monarch did not care about the past. He had bitterness toward foreigners. This pharaoh instituted a change in policy. Where the people of Israel had been held in respect and even dwelled in one of the most productive lands in Egypt, now they would be looked on as mere property rather than a people. This new dynasty would launch a policy of cruelty and abuse against the chosen nation of God. These rulers would seek to destroy Israel.

This lesson should serve as a warning to the people of God today. If believers are not careful, they can neglect the wondrous blessings of God and forget all He has done. They might become a little proud and self-consumed. This will lead them in the wrong direction. They will become hard-hearted and unwilling to listen to the leadership of God. What happened in Egypt should be a wake-up call to Christians and should cause them to be more attentive to God's direction for life.

1. _____ **A Ruthless Monarch Enslaved Israel**

Pharaoh looked across his nation to see if there were any threats to his reign. Egypt had many tribal nations who were part of its population. Most were small forces which were strongly aligned with Egypt. They offered no threat to national security. However, one nation within the borders of the land had a sizable number of people. It was the nation who had begun as a small family but had grown dramatically over the years. That nation was Israel. Pharaoh said, "Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we" (Ex. 1:9). The Israelites who were numbered when they came out of Egypt were over six hundred thousand men who were of the age to go to battle. Add the older men, the women and children and the population of Israel could conservatively be estimated to be in excess of two and a half million people. This was a sizable group who had remained a separate and distinct people. It is no wonder Pharaoh was a little concerned about them. He considered them to be a potential enemy if some nation were to attack Egypt. The Israelites might revolt and stand with the foreign power (verse 10).

Pharaoh thought about solving the problem. His solution was to force them to serve as the nation's workforce. They would become slaves for the king. This was not enlisting them to work

under normal conditions. “The Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour: and they made their lives bitter with hard bondage, in mortar, and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field: all their service, wherein they made them serve, was with rigour” (Ex. 1:13, 14). The word *rigour* had the idea of severity and cruelty and implies harshness and brutality. The life of the new workforce was made “bitter” (verse 14) and they served with “hard bondage” (verse 14), or grievous servitude. They were bowed down under the burden of their work. There was nothing pleasant about the work forced upon the Israelites.

This Pharaoh did not consider the torment he imposed on those people. Hardness of heart will make a person (then and now) consider only personal desires. It will not make the individual aware of the needs of other people.

2. _____

Pharaoh Ordered the Death of Newborn Sons

Pharaoh had determined that, if he treated the people harshly, they would not prosper. Instead, they would waste away and would be no threat to his nation. He forgot to factor God into the equation. God would not neglect His chosen people. Though they were treated with cruelty and harshness, the Lord continued to bless them. Pharaoh had a different problem now. Since his plan had not worked, what could he do to decrease the number of Israelites?

His next scheme was even more heartless and merciless than the first. He decided to cut off an entire generation. Pharaoh decreed that all newborn sons were to be killed. The midwives were commanded to murder any son who was born. The midwives feared God more than they feared Pharaoh. They did not follow his command. Pharaoh took it to another level of cruelty. He then decreed that all newborn males were to be cast into the Nile. The newborn sons would be slain.

The Lord allowed one of those newborn sons to survive. Amram and Jochebed had a son they knew had a special purpose from God (Ex. 2:2). They kept him alive at home as long as they dared. The time came when it was impossible to keep him hidden. They took this son, placed him in a water-tight basket and left him at the edge of the Nile. Soon the daughter of Pharaoh came for her daily cleansing. She saw the baby and was moved with

compassion. She called him Moses because she had drawn him out of the water. This woman decided to raise him as her child. By the providence of God, Moses' natural mother was hired to care for the child. Moses learned of his heritage at his mother's knee. This would set the stage for God's provision for the nation in years to come.

The evil intent of Pharaoh's heart was evident by his laws. He had no concern about the well-being of his subjects. All he cared about was advancing himself and his dynasty. God would not let such a callous attitude and murderous heart succeed forever. He would ultimately bring them down.

3. _____ **When God's Judgment Came, Pharaoh Hardened His Heart**

Many years passed. The pharaoh who had decreed the enslaving of Israel and the death of its newborn sons passed away. He was replaced by another ruler. The attitude changed little. Moses grew to be a strong man with tremendous skills. The time came when he had to choose. Moses chose to be identified with his natural family in Israel rather than his adoptive family of Egypt. He fled for his life. At the appropriate time, God sent him back to Egypt to deliver His chosen nation. Moses approached Pharaoh with a proposal from God. "Let my people go, that they may serve me" (Ex. 7:16). Pharaoh quickly refused the request. Why would he do so? Pharaoh had never seen the Israelites as anything other than slaves. He would never let his workforce depart. He needed them to do his bidding. Pharaoh's heart was hardened against the suffering of people, the needs of others and the demands of God.

Time after time God brought judgments against Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Rather than acknowledging that God was against them, Pharaoh caused his magicians to imitate the plagues. Finally, things got so bad, the magicians had to admit, "This is the finger of God" (Ex. 8:19). Did this declaration cause Pharaoh to relent? No, "Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them" (verse 19). It did not matter what happened, Pharaoh would not change his mind and give in to the demand of God. He would not admit defeat.

One final judgment was brought against the nation. On the night of Passover, the Lord passed through the nation on

a mission. He had given directions to the Israelites about how to protect their families. They were to kill a lamb and paint its blood on the top and sides of their doors. When the Lord saw the blood, He would pass over that house. For those who refused to obey, the Lord would strike the firstborn of the family and he would die. This happened against humans and animals. The Egyptians knew they had been afflicted by God. They declared, “We be all dead men” (Ex. 12:33). Pharaoh had destroyed his own nation because he refused to listen to God.

A hard heart will bring defeat to any person. Refusing the will of God in one’s life will never bring joy, pleasure or peace. Egypt was destroyed because the pharaoh and the people hardened their hearts against God.

Conclusion

Though Pharaoh finally sent Israel away, his heart remained hard. After their departure, he changed his mind and sent out his armies to bring them back. The Israelites were trapped between the armies, the mountains and the Red Sea. Only God could deliver them. He opened the Red Sea so that the people could pass through. The hard-hearted Egyptians followed them into the sea. The Lord closed the waters upon them and the armies of Pharaoh were destroyed. Hard hearts destroyed a nation.

People must be careful how they respond to God. It is easy to close one’s heart to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. When we do this, we are in danger of God’s punishment. Hardening one’s heart is following the bad example of Pharaoh. It is far better to listen to God and respond positively to Him. Then, there can be success.

Nimrod—The Godless Tyrant Empire Builder

APPLICATION

The lesson will show how important it is to participate in keeping government in accord with God's divine plan.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Genesis 10:8, 9; 1 Chronicles 1:10; Micah 5:6.

Related Scripture: Deuteronomy 7:10; 32:15; 1 Samuel 22:6, 12-19; 1 Kings 2:23-25; Psalms 2:12; 36:1; 52:7; 55:19; 86:14; Daniel 5:23; John 15:23; Romans 1:21.

Devotional Reading: Rebellion and Idolatry, 1 Samuel 15:23.

Introduction

From early in human history, people tended to rebel against God. The first son born to Adam and Eve was evidence of this truth. He had the ready testimony from his parents of the dangers of rebellion against the Lord. Cain refused to worship Him as God desired. Cain was a rebel against God. The human race became so rebellious that God looked over His creation and saw that “every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). The Lord determined to bring judgment upon the world. The family He chose to preserve humanity was Noah and his sons. Noah was found to be acceptable to God (verse 8). The Lord instructed him to build an ark (verse 14). When the floods came on earth, Noah, his family and representative species of all animals were on the ark. This great destruction was evidence of God's displeasure with rebellion and sin.

One would naturally assume that people would have learned their lesson. No one would ever rebel against God again. Yet,

it was only the second generation after the son of Noah that Nimrod, a man of rebellion, came to power. He cared nothing about the lessons of the flood. He wanted to become powerful and would do anything to accomplish his purpose.

This lesson is important for people today. If all a person can do is look to the past and see an interesting story, that individual has failed to learn anything. The past teaches about the dangers of rebellion and the blessings of obedience. The rebellion of Nimrod warns people today. God is real and cares about what people do. He demands their obedience and will bring judgment on those who refuse to obey.

1. _____ **Nimrod Was a Rebel**

Having a godly heritage does not assure that the next generation will follow in proper paths. Noah was a man of grace and found favor with God. Yet, that godliness did not persist among all his sons. One son, Ham, had thoughts which were not always godly. After coming out of the ark, Ham disrespected his father. His worldly attitude passed on to his sons. When Ham's grandson was born, he was given the name, Nimrod. Biblical names were always significant. The name of this child was almost prophetic. *Nimrod* means "a strong, ungodly rebel." His father expected his son to stand against God. Nimrod definitely rebelled against God.

As an adult, Nimrod led in the construction of cities and nations. The beginning of this work was Babel (Gen. 10:10). That city would be a display of ungodliness. When it was being built, the people had one thought. "Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11:4). When Noah and his family came out of the ark, the Lord gave them orders. They were to spread across the globe and populate the world (Gen. 8:17). The ungodly and rebellious Nimrod did not want to obey those instructions. He wanted to build a nation which would be powerful and strong. He rebelled against God.

Babel was also a center of false worship. The "tower, whose top may reach unto heaven" (Gen. 11:4) spoke of a temple to worship the forces of nature. The flood had covered the entire earth, even reaching above the highest mountains. No tower

built by humans could hope to surpass that height. This tower would become the center of Nimrod's power. He would rule his nation through false religion. Nimrod's rebellion against God is evident.

All people have a natural streak of rebellion. When a sign says, "Do not walk on the grass," people want to take a few steps on the grass. If a sign says, "Wet paint," the natural tendency is to reach out and touch to see if it really is wet. God has given many instructions to His people. He wants unwavering obedience. Yet, people tend to rebel just a little. They might think they have a better way than God's way. They might consider their wants as more important than God's. "Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry" (1 Sam. 15:23). Rebellion is never pleasing to God.

2. _____

Nimrod Was a Mighty Hunter Before the Lord

One of the descriptions of Nimrod was that he was "a mighty hunter before the LORD" (Gen. 10:9). This phrase has two thoughts which show the inner character of this rebellious man.

He was "a mighty hunter" (verse 9). This phrase has the idea of pursuing after prey. But the implication is something deeper. The word *mighty* has the thought of being a warrior or a tyrant. He did far more than merely hunt food for his people. The idea is that Nimrod pursued people as his prey. Since he had a desire to establish a mighty kingdom after his name, this probably has the thought of seeking to defeat and conquer other people. He would bring them into his kingdom either as slaves or as subjects. All people were the objects of his pursuit. He wanted a kingdom strong enough that nothing could defeat him.

His pursuit of people as his prey was done "before the LORD" (verse 9). This phrase has the meaning of performing the action in the face of God. He was seeking to conquer all people as a slap in the face of God. The Lord wanted to rule the hearts of all people. He wanted them to yield to His kind and helpful leadership. Nimrod stood against God in drawing people to him for leadership. He wanted to stand in the place of God. This attitude came from the one leading Nimrod. When Lucifer stood in rebellion against God, he declared, "I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon

the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High” (Isa. 14:13, 14). Now Nimrod echoed the thoughts of his guide. He wanted to defeat God.

Seeking one’s own desires is common in the world today. People might know what God has said about right and wrong. They simply do not care. They are willing to stand against the Lord as long as they get what they want. Such an attitude will not produce lasting happiness. Only God can bring true joy into the hearts of people. They should yield to Him rather than seek their own desires.

3. _____ **Nimrod Wanted To Become the Ruler of a World Empire**

Not much of the upbringing of Nimrod is given in Scripture. He was simply declared to be the son of Cush who was the son of Ham. This family did not care about God or spiritual matters. They were more concerned with physical things. Nimrod learned early to advance himself. To this end, Nimrod determined to establish a kingdom which would be unrivaled in the world. He would be the most powerful man on earth.

The beginning of that kingdom was Babel. It was built on a plain in the land of Shinar (Gen. 11:2). On this plain, Nimrod led his people to build the tower of Babel. This tower was the centerpiece of his kingdom. He drew as many people as he could to this plain so that they could build a mighty nation. They never considered what God would have them to do. Rather than scattering across the face of the globe as God had instructed them, they determined to remain close together. Later, ungodly kingdoms such as the Assyrians and the Babylonians found their roots in Babel. These nations were cruel to their enemies and horribly tortured those they conquered. When a nation finds its foundation apart from God, it will rarely turn from evil toward that which is right. Nimrod built his kingdom in opposition to God and the direction of those cities shows their continued rebellion.

The Scripture declares, “Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD” (Psalm 33:12). The United States was founded on the principle of being one nation under God. The Declaration of Independence states, “When in the Course of human events, it

becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes to impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." When the nation turns away from the God who brought it together, it is treading on dangerous ground. A nation must remember the hand of God in its formation and preservation. This will enable a nation to remain vital and strong.

Conclusion

Nimrod was a man who cared little about God. He did not obey when God gave the commission to spread across the globe. Instead, he wanted to draw people to himself so that he could be a ruler of people. The souls of men did not matter as long as he had power. People must always be concerned about what God wants from them. If they are in rebellion against the Lord, they will face His displeasure.

Nimrod's bad example should awaken us to the danger of turning against God. He is the sovereign ruler of the universe. He has the right to tell all people what they should do. It is our responsibility to obey His commands. Doing so will help us influence others toward Christ.



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Achan—The Carnal-minded Soldier

APPLICATION

This lesson shows how being carnal-minded will lead to grievous sins.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Joshua 7:1, 19-21.

Related Scripture: Exodus 20:17; Job 20:4, 5; Proverbs 22:16; Matthew 6:24; 16:26; Colossians 3:2; James 4:4.

Devotional Reading: Sowing to the Flesh Reaps Destruction, Galatians 6:8.

Introduction

The setting of the lesson material is at the end of the wilderness journey of the Israelites. They had come to the Promised Land and were ready to enter it. The first obstacle to conquering the Promised Land was the city of Jericho. It was an imposing sight. The city was built on a bluff overlooking the valley. The hill upon which the city was built was over two hundred feet high. The city walls extended upward from the top of the mound. Coming against such a city must have seemed to be a monumental task. However, God had instructions whereby victory could be gained over Jericho. The victory would not come by the mighty hand of the army. It would come through the mighty, outstretched arms of God. He would conquer the fortress of Jericho.

One of the soldiers who entered the city that day was Achan. He was an ordinary man who yielded to temptation. It is easy

for people today to be overly judgmental of Achan and his act. The same lust and self-indulgence of Achan often overcome our defenses. Rather than standing in judgment over the failure of this man, we should be careful to learn the lesson of the dangers of being worldly-minded.

1. _____ **The Covetousness of Sin**

As the people of Israel approached the city of Jericho, the Lord gave specific instructions about how they were to conquer the fortress. This included the way they were to treat the spoils of war. The loot of the city was not for the people. “And ye, in any wise keep yourselves from the accursed thing, lest ye make yourselves accursed, when ye take of the accursed thing, and make the camp of Israel a curse, and trouble it. But all the silver, and gold, and vessels of brass and iron, are consecrated unto the LORD” (Joshua 6:18, 19). No one could take any of the goods of the city. God owned it all.

The Israelites followed the battle plan of the Lord. They marched around the city once a day for six days. On the seventh day, they encircled the city seven times. As they completed the seventh circuit, the priests blew the trumpets, and the people shouted out with a great cry. As they obeyed the Lord, He caused the mighty walls of that city to crumble and fall. The way into the city was made easier. The armies ran upon the town and slew its inhabitants.

As they were going through the city, one soldier, Achan, saw something beautiful and valuable. The first thing he spied was a beautiful garment. Garments from the plain of Shinar (Babylon) were renowned for their gorgeous colors and design. It was probably a desirable, royal garment. Achan hid the garment away so that no one else would see it. Then, he saw about one hundred ounces of silver. It would have been more valuable than the garment and more durable. He took the silver. Then, Achan spied a wedge of gold weighing about twenty-five ounces. The value of the gold would be tremendous. Achan took the gold and hid it away as well. His actions show the increasing influence of sin. His temptation began with a simple article of clothing. That act of disobedience led to a greater act of defiance. Then, that sinful deed led to still further rebellion. Sin never remains dormant. It is an ever-growing disease which will eat away at

one's life until total rebellion surfaces. Achan had turned from being a soldier of the Lord to rebelling against His orders.

Covetousness will always lead people away from obedience to God. It makes them look at the things of the world as being wonderfully important. Paul had a coworker who fell prey to this attitude. His name was Demas. He had been a servant of the Lord during the missionary journeys of Paul. The time came in his life when the world grew more attractive than the work of God. Paul's final evaluation of that man was, "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2 Tim. 4:10). Demas had deserted the work of God and the mission outreach of Paul. The world was more important to him than the souls of others. No one should think he is immune to such an attitude. Anyone who begins thinking more about the world than Christ is in danger of abandoning the work of the Savior. Covetousness will always draw a person away from Christ.

2. _____

The Cover-up of Sin

Achan knew he had done something wrong. He did not show his new possessions to his friends. He quickly hid them by burying them in a hole in his tent. He did not want to take the chance someone might accidentally find them. He wanted to cover-up his sin.

This action reminds us of the actions of King David when he committed adultery with Bath-sheba. He knew he had done wrong but did not want to admit it to anyone. If he could hide the sin, then all would be well. In his attempt to conceal his wrongdoing, David first began by lying. He called for the woman's husband under the pretense that he wanted to know how the battle fared. Then, David got his friend drunk so that he would not know what he was doing. When that plan failed to produce the desired results, David sent Uriah back to the battle with orders to bring about his death. David's attempt to hide his sin caused the death of an innocent man.

People often think they can conceal their sin. If they can keep it from general knowledge, then they think they have succeeded in hiding their action. While they might be able to conceal their sin from most people, it is unlikely that it will remain hidden. Moses found this to be true. When he killed the Egyptian who was oppressing some Jewish slaves, he thought no one had seen

his action. The next day, it came to light what he had done. His apparently hidden deed was known to the Jews and also came to the knowledge of Pharaoh. His cover-up did not succeed. People would ultimately know what had been done.

Even if people can hide their actions from others, there is always One who sees and knows. “Woe unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the LORD, and their works are in the dark, and they say, Who seeth us? and who knoweth us?” (Isa. 29:15). Nothing can be hidden from the eye of the One who sees and knows all things. Though an act be performed behind closed doors, He is aware of what is happening. Nothing can be hidden from Him. “Be sure your sin will find you out” (Num. 32:23). Everyone will be judged for how he lived. There is no final and ultimate cover-up of sin.

3. _____ **The Consequences of Sin**

Soon after the conquest of Jericho, the army needed to go out against the village of Ai. Since it was not as massive as Jericho, they thought to send only about three thousand soldiers. When the army attacked the village, thirty-six Jews were slaughtered. They were soundly defeated by an insignificant little village. How could such a loss happen? Joshua was discouraged. He went to God asking the reason for the defeat. The answer from God was, “Israel hath sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them: for they have even taken of the accursed thing, and have also stolen, and dissembled also, and they have put it even among their own stuff” (Joshua 7:11). God’s condemnation did not state that one individual had sinned against Him. The entire nation had sinned. The action of one person impacted them all. Because of what Achan had done, thirty-six men lost their lives and the people of Israel suffered a demoralizing defeat.

When Joshua found the reason for its defeat, he went to the people to find the individual cause. Finally, Achan came to light as the one responsible for Israel’s sorrow. When confronted with his sin, Achan admitted his part in the crime (verse 20). He stood condemned for his act. The problem was that his sin had infected his entire family. They had been aware of what he had done and had not reported it. They were guilty as well. The selfish, covetous

act of Achan brought about the destruction of his family. They all were condemned because they followed the steps of their father.

People often think they can escape the consequences of their actions. What a person chooses to do impacts the rest of his life. “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption” (Gal. 6:7, 8). When people are worldly-minded, they will make their choices based on worldly thinking. The Bible declares, “For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8:6-8). God’s people must put their minds on Him.

Conclusion

Achan serves as an example of being worldly-minded. He knew the command of God but was unwilling to obey it. His desire for earthly wealth was more important to him than obedience. God’s people must be aware of the dangers of desiring the things of the world. Coveting the things of the world will cause a person to “fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition” (1 Tim. 6:9). Nothing good can come from loving the world. Instead, we must love the Lord supremely. Then, we will obey Him.

Absalom—The Disobedient Son

APPLICATION

Children learn from the life-styles and examples of their parents.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: 2 Samuel 15:7-14.

Related Scripture: Exodus 13:8; 20:12; Leviticus 19:3; Psalm 148:12, 13; Proverbs 3:12; 13:24; 19:18; Micah 7:6.

Devotional Reading: Blessings of Righteous Children, Psalm 127:5.

Introduction

The story of David and his family is one of extremes. David was a man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14) and should always have been focused on the will of God. Sad to say, he often followed his desires rather than God's desires. David's family was dysfunctional in that he was unwilling to follow God's divine plan for marriage. When God gave the Law, He warned the people of Israel about the kind of king to have. One of the warnings He gave was, "Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away" (Deut. 17:17). God's plan for marriage has always been one man and one woman for a lifetime. The common practice for worldly nations was for the king to have many wives. Sometimes those wives came as the dowry for a peace treaty. Other times the wives came simply because of the lust of the kings. God did not want His kingdom ruled by anyone whose passions overrode his concern for God and the people. David should have followed that advice, but he did not. As a result, his

sons did not learn how to properly restrain their own desires. This led to much trouble in the household of David.

One of those rebellious sons was Absalom. He was a handsome, persuasive young man. Absalom was able to sway people by his speech. The dysfunctional family played a part in the attitude of this headstrong young man. His actions brought tremendous grief to his father. Absalom was a disobedient son. The question presented in this lesson deals with why Absalom became defiant both to his father and to God.

1. _____ **His Parental Example**

Absalom's family life was troubled. David had taken multiple wives. He had many children by these wives. This provided an unstable home structure. There might have been a head wife whose responsibility it was to oversee the household. There might have been a favorite wife who was closer to David. However, the family structure was ordered, and there was instability. David had not been careful about how he conducted his personal life. When he saw a woman who appealed to him, he would have her as his wife.

Such an unhealthy family life wreaked havoc on the relationship between the half siblings. They had few friends outside the household and were unsure how to treat each other. Absalom had a sister named Tamar. She was a beautiful woman and caught the eye of her half brother, Amnon. He had seen how his father yielded to his desires and decided to do the same. He manipulated David to send Tamar into his bedchamber under the pretense of caring for him while he was sick. When he got her alone, he forced his half sister. Then, he despised her and sent her away. This produced intense anger in Absalom. When David never disciplined Amnon, Absalom devised a plan to avenge the dishonor. After two years, he tricked Amnon into coming to a special celebration. At the festival, Absalom commanded his servants to slay Amnon. Fearing David might actually do something about the act, Absalom fled to Geshur, the homeland of his mother. He stayed in exile for three years.

Absalom had always been one of David's favorite sons. Though he disapproved of what Absalom had done, he missed him terribly. Joab, the king's friend and advisor, convinced David to allow Absalom to return to Jerusalem. He finally agreed and

Absalom returned. This act showed David's lack of discipline among his children. He had not passed sentence on Absalom. The son had merely fled from his father. When Absalom returned to Jerusalem, he was not allowed to see the king for two years. That was not too drastic a punishment for the crime of premeditated murder, but that was all David could bring to his heart to do to his favorite son.

The parental example Absalom had did nothing to discourage his self-indulgence. When he saw his father indulging in lustful desires, why should Absalom not give in to his baser desires? When his father neglected to discipline his sons for crimes they committed, why should Absalom not do whatever he wanted? This self-indulgence would spell danger for David in time to come.

Parents should always be careful to be consistent and honest in their dealings with children. When children see their parents saying one thing and doing another, it paints a blurry picture of what is right and wrong. Whether in actions or discipline, parents should follow the directions given in the Word of God. They should seek to teach their children the ways of God both by word and example.

2. _____ **His Plan of Rebellion**

After Absalom returned to Jerusalem, he set a plan in motion whereby he could ascend to the throne. He did not care what he had to do to gain this position. Absalom plotted the overthrow of King David.

Absalom was a smooth talker. He had the ability to convince people of his sincerity. He sat at the gates of Jerusalem and met those who came to see the king with their problems. Absalom stated his agreement with their grievance and claimed King David cared nothing about their troubles. He claimed that, if he were king, he would handle the matter to their satisfaction. Day after day Absalom followed this practice. In this manner, "Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel" (2 Sam. 15:6). That was the first stage of his plan to overthrow the king.

Absalom asked permission from King David to go to Hebron for a vow he had made to the Lord. David did not want to prohibit his sons from worshiping God, so he granted the permission. Absalom's request was merely a trick. He had hired chariots, horses and fifty men to run before him. When he arrived at

Hebron, Absalom sent word throughout the nation proclaiming his ascension to the throne. Since he had beguiled the people into believing David did not care about them, they followed Absalom. He was proclaimed to be their king. David knew a civil war would devastate the city of Jerusalem and would bring hardship to the population. Instead of standing immediately and fighting, David, his family and staff fled the city. His time would come and he would return to the throne should it be God's will. At that moment, David felt he was doing the right thing.

Absalom was wicked from the start. He came into Jerusalem and assumed the place of his father. Even beyond that act, he was ready to send out his armies to capture and kill his father. Absalom cared nothing about the one who gave him life. He only thought of himself.

The actions of Absalom show the danger of refusing to give the proper parental example to one's children. People grow up doing what they are taught as children. Since Absalom was given no restraint as a child, he grew into a man with no restraints. Whatever he wanted, he thought he deserved. Parents can teach their children important life lessons if they will show them the proper way to live.

Conclusion

Absalom was a young man who thought he could do no wrong. He followed the evaluation given during the time of the Judges. "Every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). He did not care about the life of his brother. He did not care about the danger he imposed on his father. All Absalom cared about was what he wanted in life. He had been allowed to do whatever he wanted as he grew up. When he committed horrible crimes, he was not condemned for his actions. Absalom had no fear of retribution.

Parents should be cautious in their treatment of children. Sometimes parents so adore their children they think their little ones can do nothing wrong. This teaches them a pattern of wrong behavior. It will lead to worse actions in the future. If you want your children to be honest, law-abiding citizens, you must teach them proper behavior while they are children. "And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4).

King Ahab—The Worst of Israel's Kings

APPLICATION

Petty things can capture the heart and arouse the judgment of God.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: 1 Kings 16:30-33.

Related Scripture: Leviticus 25:23-28; 1 Kings 21:13, 14; 22:34-38; 2 Kings 8:18; 9:26; 13:2; 17:2; 2 Chronicles 21:6.

Devotional Reading: Those in Authority, Proverbs 29:2.

Introduction

The kings of Israel were notoriously evil. After the split of the nation, the northern tribes of Israel rebelled against the Lord and led the people into gross sins. God raised up prophets to preach God's warning about their sins, but the people refused to listen and continued in their sinful ways. Ahab was the seventh king of the northern nation of Israel. "Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD above all that were before him" (1 Kings 16:30). He did not honor the Lord. He only sought to fulfill his own pleasures. He truly was a wicked king.

The danger one can see in examining the life of Ahab is how easy it is to pursue one's personal desires and pleasures. Ahab never considered what might be good for other people. He never took into account what God would have him do. He pursued those things which pleased him. Ahab was the worst king to ever reign over the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

When Ahab came to power, he wanted to achieve peace with the nations around him. One of those nations was Zidon (or Sidon and Tyre). The pact between Israel and Zidon gave him a wife, Jezebel. The Zidonians were particularly idolatrous. Ahab should never have brought her into his household. She influenced him toward the worship of Baal as god.

Ahab grew devout in his worship of Baal. He built an altar and temple devoted to its worship. He also raised up a grove (1 Kings 16:33). This word *grove* speaks of wooden images dedicated to the worship of the Asherah (Ashtoreth). She was the Canaanite goddess of fertility and was considered the wife of Baal. Ahab influenced his nation to follow this evil example. The people already tended to drift away from God. Now their political leader was promoting their false religion. In his evil actions, Ahab “did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him” (verse 33).

People often think their actions influence and affect only themselves. What a person does always impacts others. A father who drifts away from God will often cause his family to neglect the service of the Almighty. Any person who turns away from God will negatively impact those around them. Each person should carefully consider his daily activities to make sure the activities are suitable and God-honoring. To do less will lead toward sin in one’s life.

Ahab’s wife drew him to even greater depths of sinfulness. When God gave the warning to the people of Israel about how a king should behave himself, He cautioned about the kind of wife the king should marry. Foreign and wicked wives could turn the heart of the king away from God. This happened in the life of Solomon, and it would happen with Ahab. Jezebel was devout in her worship of Baal. Ahab was not careful about the woman he married. God’s people should always exercise care when seeking a spouse for life. The wrong spouse can cause a good Christian to begin drifting away from God. When a Christian marries a non-Christian, trouble is sure to come. Often the Christian will fall under the influence of the non-Christian. God’s people should never jeopardize their Christian testimony by any action of life.

A particular event from Ahab's life shows how selfish he really was. It is the circumstances surrounding his desire to take possession of the vineyard of Naboth. This vineyard was near Ahab's palace. He wanted to make a garden to look at from the palace. It seemed logical to him to take possession of it and for Naboth to have a different location for his vineyard. However, Naboth was more concerned for his own inheritance than the comfort and pleasure of the king (1 Kings 21:3). Though the king offered a better piece of land or the value of the vineyard in money, Naboth would not agree. Ahab grew depressed because of Naboth's refusal. He went to his home and pouted (verse 4). He fell on his bed and refused to eat. Everybody knew he was upset. The picture of Ahab, pouting on his bed, is a little amusing. Here is the king of the land and the commander of the army being depressed because he did not get his way. A tiny garden was enough to throw him into despair.

Along came his evil wife. She asked what the problem was. His reply showed how shallow a person Ahab was. He wanted the vineyard and did not get what he wanted. How could he eat with such a traumatic experience? Jezebel reassured her husband. "Dost thou now govern the kingdom of Israel? arise, and eat bread, and let thine heart be merry: I will give thee the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite" (verse 7). Her philosophy was that no one had the right to refuse the king anything he wanted. The law did not back her thought, but that would not deter her wicked scheming. Her plan was simple. She wrote letters to the city leaders. They would have a feast and invite Naboth to it. In the middle of the festivities, they would bribe two men to accuse Naboth of blasphemy against God and of disrespecting the king (verse 10). Then they would have the right to take him out and stone him. The plot was carried out exactly as planned. Naboth was carried outside the city and stoned to death. Now no one had possession of the vineyard the king desired.

Jezebel went to the king and said, "Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give thee for money: for Naboth is not alive, but dead" (verse 15). Ahab was no longer sad and depressed. He had gotten what he wanted and he was glad. Ahab did not consider what it had cost

Naboth. He did not think of the sinfulness involved in getting the land. He only thought about his new possession.

People tend to be selfish. We want what we want and no one should stand in our way. When people do not achieve their wants, no matter how insignificant or trivial, they often grow sad and depressed. Such selfishness will draw a person away from God. Paul faced this problem with those around him during his ministry. He wanted people around him who were concerned about the work of Christ, but most people only “seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ’s” (Phil. 2:21). Paul later warned that in the last days, people would be “lovers of their own selves” and “lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God” (2 Tim. 3:2, 4). Selfishness will never draw a person closer to God. Instead, it will always drive him further away from the Lord.

3. _____ **His Sentence**

The actions of Ahab and Jezebel brought God’s condemnation. He sent the prophet, Elijah, to confront Ahab. This man of God had never been timid about proclaiming the word of the Lord. Whatever the message God wanted preached, Elijah was the man to do it. He would stand in the face of the king and proclaim his sinfulness.

When Elijah first approached Ahab, the wicked king saw him and said, “Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?” (1 Kings 21:20). He knew Elijah’s message would not be encouraging or peaceful. Ahab knew in his heart that he had done wrong and God would judge him for it. Elijah did not disappoint. His first words showed God’s disapproval. “Thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the LORD” (verse 20). Elijah then declared the utter annihilation of Ahab and his family. The time would come when all of his descendants would be killed. A more immediate matter was God’s declaration that Ahab would soon die. When Naboth’s blood had been shed, Ahab had only rejoiced. Now the place where Naboth’s blood had been shed, Ahab’s blood would also be spilled and the dogs would lick it up (verse 19). Even beyond that judgment, Jezebel was also condemned. The Lord promised the dogs would eat her up (verse 23). These warnings and judgments were proven true. God brought about exactly what he told Ahab would happen.

Judgment is certain. People often think they can escape God's judgment, but they are mistaken. All people will stand before the Lord to receive righteous judgment. Those who are lost will stand at the Great White Throne Judgment to receive their eternal sentence of separation from God in the lake of fire. No lost person will escape this judgment. The verdict has already been pronounced. Those without Christ will spend eternity there.

Those who are saved will stand before the Lord at the Judgment Seat of Christ. The deeds done in this life will come before the Judge. Rewards will be presented to those who have been faithful in their service to the King. This is not a judgment of whether or not a person is saved. This is a judgment for rewards. Though many Christians think they will escape examination by the righteous Judge, all will stand in His presence. God's people should prepare for that day.

Conclusion

Ahab had the opportunity to obey the Lord and be pleasing to Him. Instead, he chose the path whereby he would gain earthly pleasure but forego eternal bliss. Ahab thought it was better to gain earthly possessions and power than to think about future blessings. Sad to say, many people follow that horrible example. They seek to gain earthly advancement and forget about God. A great hymn declares, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, Look full in his wonderful face, And the things of earth will grow strangely dim In the light of his glory and grace" (words by Helen H. Lemmel). Keeping our eyes on Jesus will help our lives count for Him.

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Belshazzar— The Sacrilegious King

APPLICATION

What is true of Belshazzar is true of all men. We must be extremely careful that we not misuse the name and doctrines of God.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Daniel 5:2-31.

Related Scripture: Exodus 20:17; Leviticus 24:10-16; Psalm 74:18; Daniel 7:25; 11:36, 37; Matthew 10:25; Mark 7:21; Colossians 3:8; Hebrews 10:29; James 2:7; Revelation 13:1.

Devotional Reading: Profaning Holy Things, 1 Corinthians 3:17.

Introduction

There is an old saying that declares: “Power corrupts; and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The idea behind that saying is that if a person rises to power and has nothing to restrain his baser desires, those lusts will take control and the individual will do whatever his heart wants. This was certainly true in the case of Belshazzar. He belonged to the ruling family of Babylon. He was probably the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, the king who had taken the empire of Babylon to its greatest heights. Belshazzar’s father, Nabonidus, cared little about ruling and turned the reigns of control over to Belshazzar. He was accustomed to getting what he wanted. No one would dare stand up to him and tell him that he was acting foolishly. He was a ruler without restraints. This would spell doom for the king of a mighty nation.

This story about the handwriting on the wall shows the dangers of living without restraints. Far too many people think they can do anything they want without fear of consequences. Consequences always follow actions. This is a biblical truth. Paul wrote to the churches at Galatia warning them to consider the results of their actions. “Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Gal. 6:7). If a person makes wise, godly choices, then the results of those actions will be beneficial to that person’s well-being and to the cause of Christ. If a person follows the path of ungodliness, the results of those actions will bring sorrow. God’s people should always be careful to make wise decisions and engage in wise actions. Then, they will be able to stand before the Lord with confidence in the day of judgment (1 John 2:28). Belshazzar never considered what might come in the future. He was only concerned with the pleasure of the moment. As a result, this wicked king was brought into direct conflict with God. What happened as a result of his impulsive, sacrilegious behavior will be the focus of this lesson.

1. _____

The Party

Belshazzar was a man given to pursuing his personal passions. He wanted to be exalted and respected by all people, but he was unable to restrain himself. The party Belshazzar threw came at an inopportune time. The armies of the Medo-Persian empire had attacked the Babylonians. Belshazzar’s father had already fallen on the field of battle. The city of Babylon was the last bastion of the old empire. Belshazzar should have been preparing for the coming invasion. Instead, he threw a grand party. One thousand government officials and their women were in attendance. The entire focus of the revelry was that they “drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone” (Dan. 5:4). The debauchery of that festival was intense. Belshazzar was so intoxicated that he decided to bring the cups from the Temple in Jerusalem for the people to use in their drinking games. This was an act of ultimate disrespect and blasphemy against Jehovah. God would soon stand for Himself and show His displeasure.

People today, especially Christians of the present generation, declare they would never engage in such an act of blasphemy. They have a higher regard for God than to behave in such a

manner. While they might not engage in such base wickedness, people often act in ways that bring dishonor to God. They might not become intensely intoxicated and might not worship false gods, but they often are not too careful about their testimony in the world. They would never consider bowing to an idol, but they would let a ball game or some other recreational activity keep them from going to church. If someone in the world has been watching to see if that person's Christianity is real, when that individual stays out of church, the testimony is tarnished. God's people must be careful how they behave.

2. _____

The Problem

The Bible declares, "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Num. 32:23). Babylon had been God's tool for the punishment of the nation of Israel. God's nation had been taken into captivity because the people had rejected Jehovah. Nebuchadnezzar, the king who had taken the nation of Israel captive, had an experience when he finally acknowledged that Jehovah was God. His words expressed his heart, "I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation: now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase" (Dan. 4:34, 37). The problem was that the attitude gained at that time did not translate to his sons and grandson. Belshazzar should have known better than to belittle Jehovah and to worship idolatrous gods. God was ready to pronounce His judgment on Belshazzar and his kingdom.

As the drinking party was in full swing, there "came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote" (Dan. 5:5). The deafening sounds associated with the drinking party were quickly stilled. Everyone was in awe of what was happening. Belshazzar had been in control of the party until this time. Now, he was out of control. He was so terrified his knees knocked together (verse 6). He knew some message was written on the wall, but no one in

attendance knew what it meant. Belshazzar realized the words were for him, but what could they mean?

The king sent for the wise men of the kingdom. When they finally arrived, not one of them could tell what the words were or what they meant. Though Belshazzar promised them great wealth and power, no one would even speculate on the message. This was too important to guess. Now the king was “greatly troubled” (verse 9). How would he gain knowledge of what the words meant?

The turmoil spilled out of the banquet house. The queen came before Belshazzar (verse 10). This was probably not the king’s wife, but his mother. She would have been the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar. She had seen the change in her father and knew what had taken place those years before. She wanted to help the king. Though the wise men could not answer the problem, she knew someone who could. “Forasmuch as an excellent spirit, and knowledge, and understanding, interpreting of dreams, and shewing of hard sentences, and dissolving of doubts, were found in the same Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar: now let Daniel be called, and he will shew the interpretation” (verse 12). Daniel had probably been retired from his previous office of leadership in the kingdom. Now, he would be consulted for an answer to the dilemma faced by Belshazzar.

3. _____ **The Prophecy**

The person who would read and interpret the handwriting on the wall had been promised wealth and power. Most people would love such a promise. Daniel was unconcerned with earthly advancement. His only concern was what God would want. As he stood before the king, he was willing to tell him the truth. It would not be pleasant, but his words would be truth. The first thing Daniel told Belshazzar was that he should have known better than to conduct himself the way he did. In taking the drinking vessels from the Temple of God and using them in a profane manner, Belshazzar had lifted himself against the God of the universe. It was for that reason that the fingers had written on the wall. Daniel then proceeded to tell what the message was.

The writing declared, “MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN” (verse 25). Each word proclaimed judgment against Belshazzar and his kingdom. *Mene* means “numbered or counted.” God

had examined the kingdom carefully. This word being repeated indicated God's justice in the judgment. He did not just examine the kingdom once. He looked at it again to make sure it had not changed. His evaluation of the empire was certain. *Tekel* means "weighed." The balances were just and true. The kingdom had not measured up to what it should have become. It was lacking anything good and righteous. *Upharsin* or *peres* has the idea of something being divided. The kingdom had been examined, evaluated and now would be exterminated. The prophecy was not pleasant or enjoyable, but it was true. Daniel delivered the warning to Belshazzar just as God intended.

That same night, God's sentence against Belshazzar was fulfilled. The armies of the Medo-Persian empire had been nearing their attack against the city of Babylon. The city was located on the Euphrates River. It flowed under the walls. The armies of Darius diverted the river and were able to walk into the city under the walls. Darius had his victory, Belshazzar was executed, and God was proven true in all things, just as He always is.

Conclusion

Belshazzar should have known better than to act in such an irresponsible manner. His grandfather had declared the power of Jehovah. But Belshazzar was unconcerned with such matters. He only wanted what made him happy and helped him feel better. Nothing else mattered. As a result, he made foolish, even wicked choices and blasphemed the honor of God. People should always remember the warning from God, "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Num. 32:23). Judgment will come and everyone will give an account to God. We should carefully consider our choices each day. What we do reflects on our God. Our actions should give a positive testimony of the goodness and mercy of God. He is worthy and should be honored. Does your life speak well of the Lord?

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Judas—The Lost Church Member

APPLICATION

Some church members may not be saved.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: John 6:70, 71.

Related Scripture: Psalm 41:9; 69:25; 109:8; Proverbs 19:21; Isaiah 46:10; Luke 22:3, 21-23, 47, 48; John 6:70; 12:1-8; 13:2, 18, 31; 17:12.

Devotional Reading: The Certainty of Salvation, Ephesians 4:30.

Introduction

Many people are under the misconception that if a person has his name on the church roll, that person is automatically saved. People often make public professions of faith without really repenting of their sins and trusting Jesus as Savior. Since no human has the ability to look into the heart of another person, no one can know whether the profession of faith is real or not. A church can only go by a person's testimony. If that individual makes the claim to being a child of God, the church will then baptize the candidate. Then that person has become a member of that church.

The person under consideration in this lesson is Judas Iscariot. He was a man who met the general requirements to be a member of the church Jesus established. He had the baptism of John. This was not an easy thing to attain. Many of the religious leaders of Jerusalem went out to John to be baptized. He responded to their hypocrisy by saying, "O generation of vipers, who hath warned

you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance” (Matt. 3:7, 8). He wanted to see evidence of changed hearts and lives. John warned those hypocrites of God’s coming judgment. Judas was baptized and the Lord chose him. Churches must exercise care in dealing with people concerning their membership. A person can have every appearance of being a committed servant but might never have received Jesus as Savior. The life and failure of Judas Iscariot can teach many lessons to God’s people today.

1. _____

One May Be a Church Member but Still Be Lost

What is it in a person’s life that qualifies him to be saved? Some groups teach a person must be baptized to gain forgiveness of sins. Others teach the individual must partake of the sacraments to acquire salvation. Still others teach a person must make manifest the gifts of the Spirit (through speaking in tongues) for salvation to be complete. All these plans of salvation include things other than what is taught in the Bible.

Salvation comes as a gift from God, not by works performed by the individual (Eph. 2:8, 9). The reason is that the best works any human can accomplish are considered filthy rags in the eyes of God (Isa. 64:6). The wrong motivation behind a work or an inappropriate method will disqualify any work from being considered good in the eyes of God. The work to accomplish salvation was performed by Jesus Christ. As the only begotten Son of God, He is qualified to be the sacrifice for sins. It is only through His work that anybody can receive eternal life.

What happens when somebody only goes through the external motions of coming before a congregation professing salvation? The pastor of that church will ask the appropriate questions and bring the answers before the congregation. The church will then receive that person as a candidate for baptism. The candidate will go through the baptismal waters and become a member of that congregation. When there is no inner repentance and faith, that person has no salvation. The membership in a church is secondary to possessing eternal life. Salvation will never be granted to a person merely because his name is written on a church roll.

Judas Iscariot was a member of the church Jesus established. He made the statement of Judas' membership in His flock when He said, "Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?" (John 6:70). One might question why Jesus would have chosen Judas, a lost man, to be part of the early nucleus of the church. Jesus knew exactly what He was doing. In becoming part of the traveling band of disciples who were constantly with Christ, Judas was given almost unlimited opportunities to hear the message of the Savior. He could have responded to the message. Nothing forbade Judas from being saved. He merely chose to be a part without really possessing a relationship with the Savior. According to biblical prophecy, one of Christ's closest friends would be the one to betray Him (Psalm 41:9). It would be unlikely that a true believer in Christ would perform that shameful act. Judas would be the one to fulfill that prophecy.

2. _____

One May Be Active in Church and Still Be Lost

The disciples of Christ were called out early in the ministry of the Lord. Judas would have been one of those chosen to walk with Christ during His ministry. He was actively involved in the work performed by the disciples. Nothing stood out to make him appear to be less a disciple than any of the others. Even when the time of betrayal was swiftly approaching, the other disciples saw nothing in the conduct of Judas to make them think that he might betray their Master. He served alongside the other disciples.

Judas was even a well-respected member of the followers of Christ. Each one had a specific function to fill. Judas served as the group treasurer. One should consider the trust placed in the one who held the finances (John 13:29). He would be in charge of purchasing whatever might be needed in the work. Though he held this position among the disciples, he was still a lost man. Too many people think if they hold a position within a church, they must be fine in the eyes of God; however, a person can be active and still lost. Jesus talked about some people who were busily engaged in ministry and service. "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?" (Matt. 7:22). Those people had done

many works thinking their activity would reserve them a place in Heaven. They were doing the best they could. Their activities were not done for Him because those people were lost. Their works were done to be seen of others.

Judas was also part of the outreach of the disciples. The Lord called the twelve to Him and gave them special instructions. They were to go into various villages and cities and proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God. They went out “two by two” (Mark 6:7). These teams went where they were directed and “preached that men should repent” (verse 12). Judas joined in the work of the others telling people the message of the Lord. Though he was lost and had never repented of his own sins, Judas still participated in the ministry of reaching out to others.

Many of the troubles which arise in churches come about because some people have no spiritual life and, hence, cannot make godly and spiritual decisions. This does not mean every trouble which arises within a church is caused by a lost church member. But any time a person within a church is a continual thorn to the peace of the congregation, it would probably be wise for that person to explore his relationship with God. One who is lost will not be able to make spiritual decisions.

Conclusion

Judas, the lost church member, brought great distress to his congregation. He abandoned them for a little wealth at the expense of his Master's life. Judas betrayed the Lord into the hands of sinful men (Luke 24:7). Those religious leaders of Israel cared nothing about their own Law. They were not bothered about the cruel treatment of an innocent man. These were the people with whom Judas bargained. Though he had been associated with Christ for three years, he was ready to abandon Him.

People should carefully consider their relationship with Christ. They must have more than a mental acceptance of Him. They must have a heartfelt faith in the Son of God. If you are a child of God, then make sure your life is a testimony of your faith. Then no one will accuse you of being a lost church member.

Bar-jesus—The Child of the Devil

APPLICATION

It requires more than a name to be a Christian.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Acts 13:6-12.

Related Scripture: Proverbs 18:5; Matthew 8:16; 12:24-27;
Mark 12:38-40; Acts 13:44-50; 16:16-18; 1 Corinthians
10:20; 1 Timothy 1:10.

Devotional Reading: Filled with the Holy Ghost, Acts
13:9.

Introduction

By the time of the lesson Text, the gospel had been taken many places. Many churches had been established. One of these churches was in the city of Antioch. The members of that church were so devoted to Christ that people were soon called by His name, Christians (Acts 11:26). They were so dedicated to Jesus that they were willing to act like Him. They lived up to the nickname given them.

That church had a group of pastors who led the people in God's way. The Holy Spirit called two of them to leave Antioch to begin a new work. These men were Barnabas and Paul. Their new work was what today is called "mission outreach." They would go from place to place preaching the gospel. One of the first places they went was the island of Cyprus. They went across the island preaching to all who would listen. They finally came to the town of Paphos. The deputy there was named Sergius Paulus. He

had wisdom and heard about the message Barnabas and Paul had been preaching. He had a desire to hear for himself what they said. But there was another influential man in that town. His name was Elymas Bar-jesus. He cared nothing for what Barnabas and Paul said. His purpose was to defeat the message they preached.

This lesson will focus on the theme about what it takes to be a Christian. Bar-jesus might have had the name of being great and powerful, but he did not have what was most important in life. He had no real relationship with God. Though people thought him to be something special, he never attained a right standing with God.

1. _____ **He Was a Religious Man**

Bar-jesus represented himself as a religious teacher and prophet. He was considered to be a magician or sorcerer. He used his deceptive powers to convince people they should listen to no one but him. The Scriptures describe him as being a false prophet (Acts 13:6). This word speaks of a person who gives a false message, a man who is a religious imposter. Though people might look on him with awe and fear, he certainly did not proclaim God's message. His words only advanced his own position. He had undoubtedly used his powers of influence to convince people that he could perform miracles and had the ability to proclaim deep messages. He was nothing but a false prophet.

This is a danger in the world even today. Many people present themselves as being messengers and servants of God. Paul warned about listening to and following such people. "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness" (2 Cor. 11:13-15). If any false teacher would begin his message with the statement, "The words I will speak to you are lies," no one would listen to him. Instead, the false minister will begin his statements by saying, "The Lord spoke to me and said." Claiming authority from God lends apparent value to what has been said. The warning for God's people is for them to beware of those who claim to be followers of Christ but preach a message contrary to God's Word. God will never contradict

Himself. He will not declare one thing through the Bible and tell His servant to say or do something different. God is consistent and trustworthy. His preachers and teachers will only proclaim what His Word teaches.

Elymas Bar-jesus was a religious man, but he was lost. He had no real understanding of God and His plan of salvation. He had engaged in religious behavior because he found profit and advancement through it. He was a man who led people, but he led them away from the Lord. God's people should always beware of such men.

2. _____ **He Hindered the Gospel**

When Paul and Barnabas came to Paphos and preached the gospel there, the deputy had an interest in what they said. The message of the gospel struck a chord in his heart and he wanted to know more about this man, Jesus (Acts 13:7). Bar-jesus noticed the interest and tried to keep the deputy from listening to them preach. The lesson Text states he “withstood them, seeking to turn away the deputy from the faith” (verse 8). Bar-jesus opposed the message of Paul and tried to hinder their preaching. He did not want to lose his advisory position and so he tried to lessen their influence on the deputy.

The message of the gospel of Jesus Christ has become unpopular in the world today. It is fine to be religious, even to believe whatever a person wants. But to believe in a gospel that is the exclusive means of salvation is considered to be narrow-minded and somewhat bigoted. Christians are accused of being exclusionary, meaning they only allow a few people to go to Heaven. In reality, Christians are the most open people on the earth. They believe all people have the opportunity to be saved. The Scriptures teach that Christ did “taste death for every man” (Heb. 2:9). The Bible also declares, “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men” (Titus 2:11). Furthermore it states, “Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely” (Rev. 22:17). Any claim that God's ability to save is limited is false. Nothing is too difficult for God. The problem people have is that God demands repentance and faith to obtain eternal life. A person must desire salvation to gain it. It is available to any and all who will call upon the name of the Lord (Rom. 10:13).

Many religions add much to God's plan of salvation. Some want people to go through certain religious rituals to deserve eternal life. These works would include going through the practice of baptism and participating in the Lord's Supper to obtain or complete one's salvation. Other religions want a person to hold out faithful to the end for the individual to gain true salvation. This belief means the individual must work faithfully to complete his own salvation. These are in disagreement with God's Word. They hinder people from receiving eternal life much like Elymas Bar-jesus hindered the deputy of the town from receiving the message preached by Paul and Barnabas.

3. _____

He Opposed All that Was Good and True

When Paul confronted Bar-jesus, he spoke harsh, but true words. "O full of all subtilty and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?" (Acts 13:10). His true nature was revealed in these words. He might have been religious, but he was a lost man, a "child of the devil" (verse 10). When he tried to deflect the deputy's attention away from the gospel (verse 8), he was following the leadership of the devil. Satan wants to keep all people from gaining eternal life. Bar-jesus followed the inner desire for self-glory. Two things were said about this man which show his heart and purpose in life.

Bar-jesus was the enemy of everything that was good and righteous. He was the adversary of all that God found good and righteous. Righteousness begins with one's relationship with God. One who has received Jesus as Savior has obtained God's righteousness. The believer does not present personal righteousness for God to approve. All righteousness comes from God. "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:21). A person is made fit for Heaven because of the righteousness of Christ being imparted to the individual. It is always Christ's righteousness. Bar-jesus was the adversary of that righteousness. If he could prevent the deputy (Acts 13:7) from believing in Christ, he could keep him from receiving that righteousness. He was the enemy of righteousness.

He tried to pervert the true ways of God. His purpose was to distort and corrupt what God proclaimed good and true. One could tell by watching that the ways of Barnabas and Paul were morally upright and good. The phrase *right ways* has the idea of a path that is level and straight. God's message presented to the deputy was one which would show him the way of eternal life. Bar-jesus tried to corrupt that way. Paul warned about false teachers who would seek to pervert the gospel. He said no one had the right to pervert the way of life, not even angels or Paul himself (Gal. 1:8, 9). Anyone who perverted the way of life would suffer judgment from God. Bar-jesus would suffer such a fate.

When Paul finished his statement of warning to the false prophet, a marvelous event happened. Bar-jesus was in spiritual blindness. He did not see nor understand the glorious message of Jesus Christ. Since he was spiritually blind, he would have a physical judgment that reflected that inner condition. "And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness; and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand" (Acts 13:11). What was on the inside of that evil man now was reflected in his outward condition. He was utterly blind. God's judgment had fallen upon him.

Conclusion

The evil prophet had endeavored to keep the deputy (Acts 13:8) from coming to know Jesus Christ as his Savior. His plot and scheme did not work. When the deputy (verse 12) saw God to be more powerful than the false prophet, he trusted Jesus and became a child of God. Satan will always try to influence people away from coming to Christ. He wants no one to be saved. However, he cannot keep anyone from trusting Jesus as Savior. Everyone has that opportunity. They simply need to come to Christ and be saved.

Caiaphas—The Renegade High Priest

APPLICATION

A spiritual leader should be the epitome of righteousness and truth.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: John 11:49-53.

Related Scripture: Leviticus 21:10-15; Numbers 3:32; 1 Samuel 2:12-17; Jeremiah 23:11, 12; Ezekiel 22:26; Matthew 26:3-5, 14, 15, 47, 51-68; 27:1, 2, 27-30; Acts 4:6-21; 5:17-41.

Devotional Reading: Expectations of a Spiritual Leader, Titus 1:6-9.

Introduction

Being in leadership brings great responsibility. This is true in all areas of life. One who works as a foreman at a manufacturing plant is responsible for what takes place on the job. One who serves as a teacher is responsible for what happens in the classroom. One who leads a church has the oversight of all that happens in the church. This is why the Word of God gives this admonition, “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you” (Heb. 13:17). The pastor is responsible for the actions and behavior of the church and its members.

This principle was also true in the nation of Israel. They were a people chosen by God as His special people. He had given laws to govern that nation. Their worship revolved around the Temple

or Tabernacle. God set aside one of the tribes to be the priests for the entire nation. These priests were to instruct the people about how to live. They had the responsibility of watching over the nation to make sure its citizens understood the Law of God. Over the general priests was one particular leader, the high priest. He was the primary spiritual leader of the nation. His life and faith set the tone for the nation of Israel. He was supposed to be descended from the line of Aaron, the first high priest. By the time of Christ, the office of high priest had become more political than spiritual. The one serving had been appointed by the Romans and was not qualified by any other standard. His purpose had nothing to do with the spiritual welfare of his nation. His goal was to maintain his political position and to increase his wealth.

The goal of this lesson is to show the importance of having spiritual leaders who want to live by the standards established by God in His Word. Far too many people only want the position for some benefit they might gain. Instead, they should be examples of righteousness and truth. The man who served as the bad example in this lesson was Caiaphas. We will see some of the mistakes he made.

1. _____ **Caiaphas Had No Regard for Justice**

The timing of the lesson Text falls near the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus. Many people were following Him, and the religious leaders of Israel became concerned. One of them observed, "If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation" (John 11:48). Their worry about Jesus had little to do with what He was teaching. They were concerned about their position within the Roman economy. Caiaphas, who served as their high priest, declared, "Ye know nothing at all, nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not" (verses 49, 50). His statement did not reflect any deep understanding of the will of God. He only thought of his own place in the nation. He was not concerned with justice or righteousness.

One of the problems which brought about God's judgment upon the people of Israel was their unwillingness to behave justly. Isaiah warned, "And judgment is turned away backward,

and justice standeth afar off: for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter” (Isa. 59:14). The government leaders cared little about God and His way. They were only concerned about self. The men who were supposed to lead the nation spiritually focused on their position and what they might gain. Justice and equity did not matter because it did not enhance their position or wealth. This attitude was foreign to the mind God wanted them to have. Solomon wrote the book of Proverbs to instruct his sons on how they should behave. The truths he gave them should have applied to all who followed him as king. The generations which followed forgot his words, “To do justice and judgment is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice” (Prov. 21:3). Some things are more important and valuable than those things which can be gained through human effort. God can bless in ways which stagger the imagination. Wisdom leads in the direction of obedience, justice and righteousness. Will we follow that guidance?

2. _____

Caiaphas Twisted Truth for His Own Benefit

Caiaphas was always guilty of twisting matters to suit his own purpose. Honesty and integrity meant little to that conniving snake. Whatever it took to advance himself was exactly what Caiaphas would do. Dealing with Jesus would be handled in the same devious manner. He would do anything to push that threat out of his way. His philosophy in handling Jesus was to use Him as the scapegoat for any trouble which might arise. If one person could be blamed for all upheavals which came, then that man could bear the guilt of the nation (John 11:50, 51). What Caiaphas did not know was that he spoke more truth than he realized. Jesus truly would bear the sin of His nation. Not only would He die for Israel, He would be crucified for the sin of the entire world. This was a truth Caiaphas never would have wanted. He would rather have all Gentiles die than for them to have salvation. But truth simply did not matter to him. He was merely seeking a way to preserve his and the council’s position of authority in Israel.

The conduct of Caiaphas in this matter is repeated often today. Some religions are built upon the wants and desires of their founders. A person was not content with present religion so a

new faith system sprang into existence. Doctrines were modified to match the thoughts of the founder. If new religious writings were required, then the founder would receive a revelation to gain authority for his new teachings. A new religion came into existence, but it did not have truth as its basis. Truth was twisted for the advantage of an individual.

The time is coming in the future when a man will come on the world stage. He will appear to have the answers to all the world's problems. As he gains notoriety, another man will enter the scene praising the first as being God's answer for the world. The first man will be the anti-Christ and the second will be his false prophet. They will twist and pervert religion to advance their agenda. Satan will gain an advantage because he will deceive people through religion. This has always been his practice, and he will continue to use religion for his wicked purposes. No one should be amazed when Satan uses religion to deceive people.

3. _____

Caiaphas Was Guilty of Christ's Crucifixion

How Caiaphas responded to the ministry of Jesus was wrong. His next move would be particularly monstrous. He had implied that someone might have to take the blame for the nation of Israel. In taking its guilt, that person would have to die. Now the identity of that individual would be revealed. "Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death" (John 11:53). The leader of the plot was none other than their spiritual leader, Caiaphas. He hatched this despicable plot. He was responsible for the actions which followed.

While it is easy to look at Caiaphas and blame him for the death of the Savior, he does not hold sole responsibility. Every sin ever committed served to hold Jesus on the cross. Jesus went there to pay the price of sin. He wanted everyone to have the opportunity to obtain eternal life. He was willing to suffer and die for all people. Because of this fact, every person is at least partly responsible for His torturous death. But all people also have the opportunity to be saved if they will only repent of their sins and trust in Jesus as their Savior.

Caiaphas was the spiritual leader of the nation of Israel. He should have been concerned about the spiritual welfare of his people. Instead, he was willing to crucify the Son of God. This

is a danger faced by many today. They might be in positions of political leadership. Many who hold political office claim to hold conservative positions on matters such as traditional marriage and abortion. They claim it is political suicide to vote their moral convictions. It is shameful when politicians vote to keep their positions rather than declaring what is right and wrong. Others might hold positions of spiritual leadership. They might know right from wrong but are afraid to state their opinions because someone might become upset. Those in positions of leadership should never be afraid to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). God's Word will always be proven true even when people disagree with it.

Conclusion

Not long after the events of the lesson Text, Jesus hung on the cross. The religious leaders who had been present at that meeting where they began their plot against Jesus cast their taunts against the One hanging on the tree. They mocked Him and cried out, "He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him" (Matt. 27:42). They showed their disdain for Jesus. They had the opportunity to repent of their sin, but they were unconcerned with their spiritual condition. They had what they wanted. Jesus was out of the way.

People still should exercise care when they respond to Jesus. Especially, those in positions of leadership should be careful. They have influence on others. What they say is important. Spiritual leaders should conduct their lives in righteousness and truth.

Felix— The Procrastinating Governor

APPLICATION

The student will become aware of the eternal dangers of putting off salvation.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Acts 24:24, 25.

Related Scripture: Proverbs 27:1; Matthew 24:48-51; 25:2-12; Luke 9:59-62; Hebrews 3:7-19; 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 3.

Devotional Reading: The Dangers of Procrastination, Hebrews 3:12, 13.

Introduction

The Roman government ruled its far-flung empire through a system of governors who would be over a conquered region. These men were often the buddies of senators or emperors. They might have no governing ability, but they held their exalted position because of their friendship with someone in power. Felix was placed in the position of governor, or procurator, over the region of Judah. He was a former slave who had been freed for some unknown reason by the emperor, Claudius. Felix was a crooked and immoral ruler who cared nothing for the people he ruled. He pampered himself with every lustful pleasure he could imagine. Because of his harsh and corrupt leadership, many people rose up in opposition to him. Ultimately, Felix was removed from his position.

The most notable part of the reign of Felix revolved around the time when the apostle Paul had been arrested and confined

to a prison in Caesarea. The events which surrounded Paul's time in that prison show the way of thinking for that depraved individual. One of the traits Felix exhibited during that time was his tendency to put decisions off until the answer was required. His treatment of Paul showed his self-consumed ways.

1. _____ **Paul's Arrest**

The events leading up to Paul's imprisonment with Felix began in Jerusalem. Paul came to Jerusalem with an offering to help the hurting saints in that region. A terrible drought had afflicted the area and the saints faced harsh times. Churches from other places had joined together to send an offering to help them. Paul and others were the emissaries for these churches. While Paul was in Jerusalem, the occasion arose where he needed to be in the Temple. The traditional Jews hated Paul and his ministry. When they saw Paul on the Temple grounds, they exploded with anger. They accused him of bringing a Gentile to the Temple which would defile it. They roused a mob to riot against Paul. During the uproar, a Roman centurion came down to arrest Paul, thinking he was a notable criminal. The Jewish leaders accused Paul of inciting the riot, and he was taken into custody. Because of a plot by some of the council members, Paul was moved to Caesarea to be held there until his trial could be planned and held.

Five days later, the accusers from Jerusalem arrived at the courtroom of Felix. They presented their case against Paul. Their charges were not exactly what they had claimed back during the riot in Jerusalem. They accused Paul of being a "pestilent fellow" who was a "mover of sedition among all the Jews" and a false religionist (Acts 24:5). The word *pestilent* has the idea of causing disease. They declared Paul was a sickness to the people. The more serious charge for the Romans would be the claim that Paul stirred up sedition. This was an allegation stating Paul incited people to stand against the government. Rome was notorious for putting down rebellion. This charge would spark retribution by the governor. The accusers claimed they had tried to handle the situation peacefully. The Roman centurion had caused the trouble.

Paul came to Jerusalem to help people who were hurting. His good intentions were defeated by men who cared nothing

about the welfare of others. They only wanted to maintain their positions. Their action introduced the case to Felix, the procrastinating governor.

2. _____ **Felix's Delay in Judgment**

Felix was in the position of authority. He had the right to decide the case between Paul and his accusers. He heard the opposition to Paul declare his guilt in many areas. Yet, Paul's defense was adequate to the case. It was impossible for him to have done all of which they accused him. Paul declared that the jealousy of the Jews was based on one factor, his belief in the resurrection of Jesus from death (Acts 24:21). He was innocent and Felix knew quite well the schemes of the Jews. In fact, Felix had a full understanding of the belief systems both of the Jews and of the Christians (verse 22). He could have passed judgment that moment. Instead, he delayed.

Though Felix knew the case against Paul was without merit, he did not release him from imprisonment. He let him have a little freedom. He even allowed his friends to visit with him (verse 23), but he did not let Paul have complete freedom. He remained confined to his prison.

One of the primary reasons Felix kept Paul bound was because of a hope he possessed. "He hoped also that money should have been given him of Paul, that he might loose him" (verse 26). Procrastination, or delay, in making decisions can be spurred by many reasons. In the case of Felix, it was greed. One must remember the background of this man. He was originally a slave who had been freed by Caesar. Felix might also have been concerned about financial matters. He saw in Paul one who was innocent and had many friends. Those friends might produce some bribe money to Felix and bring about the release of their friend. Things did not work out the way he anticipated. Paul remained bound in that prison for two years (verse 27).

Delays in making decisions will rarely result in the desired outcome. People often put off deciding on something because they are afraid of what will happen. A delay in choosing or in resolving an issue will often make the consequences even worse. People must be willing to do what is right and do it at the proper time.

3. _____ Felix's Delay in Being Saved

While Felix delayed Paul's release, he constantly called for Paul to come to him. He hoped to receive a bribe from Paul's friends to bring about his release. This would not happen. What did happen was that Paul was given an opportunity to present the gospel to this lost man. Paul was never one to back down from such an opportunity. As a result, Paul "reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come" (Acts 24:25). They carried on a conversation with Paul giving the logical and thoroughly discussed answers to any questions which might be raised. The message Paul presented to Felix would be for the purpose of convincing Felix of his need to be saved.

Paul reasoned with Felix about righteousness. This word speaks of the relationship one can have with God. It speaks of equity of character and holiness imparted. The greatest need Felix had was to gain eternal life. Paul wanted to give him the opportunity. This is the primary need of the entire world. Most people do not mind talking about religious matters as long as the discussion does not get too personal. When the conversation comes to a person's sinfulness before God, the dialogue has gone too far and people grow uncomfortable. People need to know they are sinners without hope apart from Jesus Christ. Until they arrive at that point, they will never repent of sin and trust Jesus as Savior. Paul began his conversations by pointing out the need of a right relationship with God.

Paul also reasoned with Felix about temperance. This word speaks of self-control. In his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul used this term to describe how an athlete gains greater strength and ability. Through the discipline of exercise and practice, he excels in his chosen event. Paul tried to convince the wicked ruler of the value of self-control. Felix was on his third marriage, this time having persuaded Drusilla to leave her husband for him. He was given to craving material gain. Paul wanted him to learn the importance of self-control. This would make him a better person and a better ruler. There is no indication Felix listened to Paul's advice.

Paul further reasoned with Felix about the judgment to come. All people will stand before God and give an account for their lives on earth. Though Felix stood in the position of judge over Paul, the day would come when he would be on the other side of

the bench. Felix would stand before God. How he lived on earth would be brought into judgment. All people need to realize this truth. People deny the reality of the coming judgment because they do not want to stand there. Regardless of their fear, judgment is coming.

The dialogue between Paul and Felix was powerful. The message Paul presented touched the heart of Felix. The words were so convicting that “Felix trembled” (Acts 24:25). He could not stand the thought of what was ahead. He knew the words Paul spoke were truth. He understood he faced a time of judgment and would be found lacking. He was terrified. The prospect of facing an eternity without God is a fearful thought. Spending eternity in the torments of the lake of fire is also frightening. Felix trembled at the future he faced. But how would he respond? He said to Paul, “Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee” (verse 25). He delayed when the time came to make the most important decision of his life.

Conclusion

Felix had a tremendous opportunity. He knew Paul was innocent and could have released him. He knew the message Paul preached about eternity was truth and could have believed. Instead, he procrastinated. He delayed when dealing properly with Paul. He delayed when it was time to receive Jesus as Savior. The “convenient season” (verse 25) never came. There is no indication from his life that Felix ever trusted Jesus as his Savior. His delay cost him eternally.

People should realize God always has their good in mind. He wants them to spend eternity with Him in Heaven. Many people delay when making the decision to trust Jesus. Do not be foolish. If you are lost, do not delay your decision to be saved.

Demetrius—The Money-crazed Craftsman

APPLICATION

“The love of money is the root of all evil.”

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Acts 19:23-28.

Related Scripture: Proverbs 13:7; 18:11; 21:20; 22:2; 28:6; Isaiah 33:6; Matthew 6:19-21; 13:52; 26:14, 15; Colossians 2:3.

Devotional Reading: Treasures in Heaven or Treasures on Earth? Matthew 19:16-22.

Introduction

The attraction of material gain is something that is almost overwhelming to some people. They cannot handle the allure that money holds over their lives. Paul warned Timothy of the dangers associated with the desire for material gain. “But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Tim. 6:9, 10). In a time when there is uncertainty about economic conditions, people are caught up in concern about their financial security. They worry whether they will have enough to make it through life. This attitude forgets the admonition of the Lord when He said, “Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly

Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things” (Matt. 6:31, 32). Jesus knew people would worry over things they could not control, so He encouraged them to rely on Him.

The events of this lesson happened when Paul was in the city of Ephesus. This was a prominent city of Asia Minor. His ministry began having an impact among the people there. As a result, those whose business involved the idolatrous gods of the city became concerned. The gospel will always impact people, especially when they are willing to listen. Sometimes people will respond positively, and sometimes they will respond negatively. Each person must make the choice about how he will respond to God.

1. _____ **The Business of Demetrius**

Demetrius was a silversmith. His primary occupation was the manufacture of silver statues which were idolatrous images of Diana. The shape of the image is uncertain. The town clerk later declared that the image of Diana had fallen down from Jupiter. It might have been a meteorite. The craftsmen might have taken that rough form and stylized it into a beautiful image. The work of Demetrius and the other craftsmen was to form the images and sell them for a great profit. They really were not concerned with the worship of the idol. They were only worried about their wealth. Demetrius said, “Sirs, ye know that by this craft we have our wealth” (Acts 19:25). His business and his material gain were all that Demetrius cared about. He would do whatever it took to protect his income, even to the point of persecuting anyone who got in his way. Nothing else mattered.

People have the need of knowing what is really important in life. Far too many think their jobs are the only important things in life. They will spend their time and efforts in pursuit of material gain. While people must work to provide the needs of life, they should never think their employment is all that matters. What matters is eternity. When the Lord talked about not worrying about things on earth, He also declared, “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matt. 6:33). The opposite of focusing on worldly things is seeking God and His way. Rather than worrying about whether one’s wealth will be sufficient on

earth, a person should be concerned about whether his life is pleasing to God.

Demetrius' life was centered on his business. Nothing mattered but gaining more wealth. With life revolving around business and wealth, a person has the wrong purpose in living. God should be the focus of every decision made. No matter what happens, God deserves our devotion.

2. _____ **The Preaching of Paul**

“And the same time there arose no small stir about that way” (Acts 19:23). Paul had ministered in Ephesus for some time. He preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. “For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). The message being preached in Ephesus was the way of salvation. But the message went even further. For those who received Jesus as Savior, Paul showed the way to live for Christ. “There arose no small stir about that way” (Acts 19:23). “That way” (verse 23) was a reference to the church. Those who were saved and baptized fellowshiped together as a church. Undoubtedly, this had happened in Ephesus as well. The congregation had become influential. Demetrius and others of his trade had begun to feel the difference in their incomes. Now they were a little worried about how far this new movement might go.

The message preached by Paul is the message the world still needs. People are lost and must learn about the saving grace of the Lord. God's people should be presenting the good news of Jesus Christ to the lost and dying world. The problem is that some people are afraid of offending others. They have listened to the lies of the world saying Christian people should not try to force their Christianity on others. It is true that Christians will not and should not try to force others into a profession of faith. But this fact does not lessen the responsibility they have to share the gospel. Some people might be offended, but they still need to hear. Jude described this duty as “others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire” (Jude 23). Some people have a natural doubt or dislike about the things of Christ. They will not readily accept the message of repentance and faith. Though they do not easily or quickly accept the message of salvation, they still need to hear it. It is not a political message they need to hear. It is not even

a benevolent message they need to hear. They need the power of the gospel so that they might have the forgiveness of sins (Rom. 1:16). They need Jesus Christ.

Late in his life, Paul wrote a message of encouragement to a young pastor named Timothy. He wanted Timothy to serve God with all his strength and ability. One admonition he gave Timothy concerned his readiness to present the message of Jesus Christ. “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2 Tim. 4:2). Whether the message was popular or not, whether people were responding or not, Timothy was to continue preaching the Word of God. That was his purpose and his calling. It was also what the world needed. The gospel of Jesus Christ is still what the world needs.

3. _____ **The Reaction of Demetrius**

When Demetrius saw how the city responded to the preaching of Paul, he decided on a course of action. The first step was to call together all those who were economically affected. The entire guild of the silversmiths was impacted by people responding to the gospel and turning away from the worship of Diana. Demetrius related how the followers of Christ were stealing away many who had formerly been worshipers of Diana. Demetrius showed the craftsmen how far Paul’s preaching had reached. “Throughout all Asia, this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands” (Acts 19:26). The only gods people of that region knew were idolatrous gods which had been formed by the hands of some sculptor. This means Paul had defied all the gods the people of Ephesus believed in (verse 27). Demetrius wanted swift retribution. They needed to oppose the man who spoke against both their religion and their livelihood. Demetrius stirred up the people so much they started a riot. To show their devotion to the goddess Diana, the mob began shouting their faith, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians” (verse 28). This went on for two solid hours (verse 34). They would not stop their shouting because they wanted all people to know their devotion to Diana. Finally, the town clerk was able to still the racket and convince the people to stop their riot (verse 35). He was concerned the

Romans might think the city was rebelling against the empire (verse 40). The assembly broke up and the people departed.

The reaction people have toward the gospel will vary. Some in Ephesus responded to Paul's preaching and were saved and a church was established. Not everyone received the message. Demetrius and many more would not consider the spiritual importance of Paul's words. They stood against him and the work he tried to accomplish. The same will hold true today. Some people will have open hearts and will respond to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. They will trust Jesus as their Savior and will receive eternal life. Others will be offended that anyone had the nerve to tell them they are sinners. They will reject the gift of eternal life because they are too proud to ask for help. The reaction of those who hear the message should not govern whether or not we tell them about Jesus. We must obey the Lord's commission.

Conclusion

Money is a necessary part of life. The attitude toward riches is where the danger lies. If a person lusts after material gain, that individual will fail toward God. Jesus warned, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:19, 21). The psalmist David wrote, "A little that a righteous man hath is better than the riches of many wicked" (Psalm 37:16). God's people should always be careful about how they view riches. They can be a boon or a curse. It all comes down to one's attitude toward wealth. Do not allow yourself to be bewitched by uncertain riches. Instead, place all your trust in God.



Herod—The Paranoid King

APPLICATION

To show the child of God, who enjoys the eternal promises and blessings of God, how foolish it is to be disturbed about the future.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Matthew 2:1-6, 16.

Related Scripture: Psalms 37:5; 55:22; Proverbs 16:3; Jeremiah 17:7, 8; Matthew 6:19-21, 30; 14:3, 4; Luke 13:31, 32; Acts 5:23-33; Philippians 4:6.

Devotional Reading: One Day at a Time, Matthew 6:34.

Introduction

Herod the Great was a character mentioned in the Bible who appeared to have no redeeming qualities. He was cruel and paranoid. Nothing in his actions would cause him to be loved or appreciated by his subject people, the Israelites. His actions did nothing other than drive their affection and devotion further away. Herod the Great had been elected as the king of the Jews by the Roman Senate. He was not Jewish by birth. His family had embraced Judaism for its political advantages. He thought that, if he were a Jew by choice, maybe the people would accept his reign. His hope was not realized. He maintained his rule through harsh practices and cruel punishments. Though the Jews could not overthrow him, they were never happy with his reign.

Herod the Great began a legacy which was followed by his descendants. Where he was cruel and paranoid, his sons

and grandson were equally wicked and paranoid. They saw conspiracies and enemies everywhere. Their concern for the future circled around what might happen to them. Their fear caused them to react harshly against any perceived danger to their safety or their reign. They would strike at anyone or anything they saw as a threat. The future held nothing certain from those wicked men.

This lesson will show how those men reacted to those perceived threats. Their response was one of fear. God's people do not have to fear what the future holds. They can know God has everything under control. The future is in the palms of his hands.

1. _____ **Herod the Great Feared Jesus and Murdered the Babies in Bethlehem**

At the exact moment of time chosen by God the Father, Jesus was born on earth. His birth took place in a sleepy little village called Bethlehem. Just a few miles away lived the cruel king, Herod the Great. To acknowledge the birth of His Son, God placed a special star in the sky. Certain wise men from the east came to honor the newborn King. They had followed the star. Their trek brought them near the city of Jerusalem. It was natural for the wise men to assume the king of the Jews would be born in Jerusalem. It was the capital city of Israel. When they arrived at the palace, they asked King Herod where the newborn king of the Jews might be. This was news to Herod. He was the king, not some baby. He demanded the priests and scribes tell him where Jesus should be born (Matt. 2:4). They quoted the prophecy from Micah 5:2 declaring He would be born in Bethlehem. Herod instructed them to find Him and report back to him. He claimed he also wanted to honor this new king. After they found Jesus, God gave them a dream warning them not to return to Herod.

When Herod realized they were not returning to him, he was full of fury. He issued a decree that all boys in Bethlehem who were two years old and younger were to be killed. This horrible, cruel decree was carried out. Though Herod was an old man who was soon to die, he did not want any threat to his rule. His fear and paranoia overruled any common sense he might have possessed. He was willing to cause the deaths of many baby boys just to have a sense of security.

Herod need not have worried. Christ did not establish a physical kingdom. His was a spiritual kingdom. Jesus taught that His kingdom dwelled within the hearts of those who followed Him. “Behold, the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). Herod’s fear about the future influenced him to commit a horrible and heinous act. He will always be remembered as the butcher king.

2. _____ **Herod’s Son, Antipas, Feared His Subjects Would Lose Faith in Him and Beheaded John the Baptist**

Herod had a son whose name was also Herod. He was also called Antipas. He followed in the steps of his father in that he was more concerned with his own position than he was in doing what was right. He wanted what he wanted and would do whatever it took to accomplish his goal. The Gospel of Matthew tells of one event from his life. Antipas had been married to the daughter of a political ally. Antipas found another woman who was more pleasing to him. She was married to his half brother, Philip. Her name was Herodias. She was the granddaughter of Herod the Great. The relationship and the nearness of kin show how selfish and twisted this man was. When this new relationship took place, John the Baptist condemned the action. It was unlawful and immoral. Herod was unhappy with such open condemnation but was unwilling to do anything about it. Herodias, on the other hand, was quite willing to do something. She manipulated her husband and her daughter to accomplish her hateful desire. Because of a dance which pleased Antipas, she asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod was unwilling to deny the request because he would lose honor in the eyes of his court. He had his executioners murder an innocent man because he was unwilling to do what was right.

Far too many people are only concerned with their own wishes and not with what is right. They will manipulate others to do things that are wrong because it advances their own agenda. In doing this, they are showing their lack of faith in Jesus Christ. If they trusted Him, they would not seek to manipulate other people. All people, especially all Christians should never fear what the future holds because God is in control of everything.

3. _____ **Herod's Grandson, Agrippa 1, Fearing the Lord's Church, Killed James**

The next generation arrived. Agrippa wanted to govern all the territory his grandfather had ruled. At the death of Herod the Great, his land had been divided into three regions. Agrippa was popular in Rome, so he was able to convince Claudius to combine the three regions back into one territory. He ruled this area to please the people he was over. Those who followed Christ were not well respected by the Jewish leaders. They wanted the ones who were preaching about Jesus to be silent. One of the leaders of that group was James. He was a vocal witness of Jesus. Agrippa knew the Jewish leaders did not like the followers of Christ, so he arrested James. He was not content merely to arrest and imprison James. Agrippa ordered his execution. Since the Scriptures state he was killed with a sword (Acts 12:2), it is likely he was beheaded. This was a particularly gruesome form of execution. Yet, it appears Agrippa enjoyed such dramatic acts. When he saw how pleased the people were, he proceeded to arrest Peter as well (verse 3). Undoubtedly, he intended to treat Peter as he had James. He would likely have killed him. The time of Peter's arrest was during the days of unleavened bread. This was a Jewish celebration. Since Agrippa fancied himself a devout Jew, he would wait until after the feast days were completed. Through the prayers of the church, Peter was miraculously released from prison. On that occasion, God defeated the cruel plans of a wicked man.

Agrippa did not need to fear the Lord's churches. God has always directed His people and churches to obey the laws of the land. "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God" (Rom. 13:1). That should have been enough to ease the fears he possessed. But God goes even further. He commands His people to pray for those in positions of government power. "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour" (1 Tim. 2:1-3). God's people should be the best citizens. They should obey the laws of the land and should pray for all government officials. To

do less than that is to disobey God. But Christian people should go even further. They should do their best to elect officials who hold the same moral standards. They should voice their opinions on such moral matters as the sanctity of human life and the sacredness of traditional marriage. If they bow to the world's thoughts on these matters, they have compromised on things clearly expressed by God.

Agrippa looked at the followers of Christ as a threat to his power. He was fearful because he did not understand the truth about them.

Conclusion

The Herod family produced many rulers in the Holy Land. They were men who thought of themselves as rightfully reigning there. One of their problems was that their lineage was not really Jewish. They had no right to the throne of David. Another problem they had was their lack of concern for what God said about right and wrong. They would do whatever it took to retain their power. When someone appeared to be a threat, they were quick to remove any danger they perceived. Because of their paranoia, they feared almost everything. They had no real faith in God.

God's people should never fear what the future holds. What is yet to come is fully controlled by God. In fact, the future holds great promise for those who have trusted Jesus as Savior. The day will come when He will catch us out of the world to be with Him forever (1 Thess. 4:15-17). With such a glorious promise to sustain us, why should we ever worry? When events around us seem so overwhelming, we can trust in the Lord. He is always in control.