

GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANT

When Israel were in bondage in Egypt, they cried out in their distress. God heard their cries, and said to them:

I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments: And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: and ye shall know that I am the LORD your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you in unto the land, concerning the which I did swear to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you for an heritage: I am the LORD. (Exodus 6:6–8)

God would, because of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, would deliver the Israelites, and make them His covenant people so that they would be His people, and He would be their God. God did as He promised: He delivered Israel from their bondage to Pharaoh, a cruel despot, so that they might serve Him, a benevolent king.

After God delivered His people from their bondage in Egypt, so that they He brought them to Mount Sinai, where He said to them:

Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. (Exodus 19:4–6)

God reminded Israel of how He had delivered them from their bondage in Egypt, and that He delivered them so that they might serve Him. So, at Mount Sinai He made a covenant with them. If they would obey Him, then they would be His people, and He would be their God, and so they would be a people unique among all the nations of the earth. The people answered, “All that the LORD hath spoken we will do.” (Exodus 19:8) So, God gave Israel His law, the Ten Commandments, and Moses offered animal sacrifices, sealing the covenant in blood. (Exodus 20:1–17; 24:3–8)

The Israelites promised to obey God’s law, but they soon broke their promise. When Moses was away from them on the mountain, they made idols of gold, and they worshiped, violating the First Commandment, and the Second. God was so angry with the Israelites for their betrayal that, if not for Moses’s intercession, He would have destroyed them all. He did not leave their offense unpunished, however, but sent a plague against them. (Exodus 32:35)

When it was time for Israel to leave Mount Sinai to travel to the promised land, He revealed Himself to Moses saying:

The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:6, 7)

God is just and gives to every man what He deserves; yet, He is also merciful, and He forgives men when they repent. Then God renewed the Covenant with Israel, reminding them of His law, especially His law concerning other gods.

Forty years later, the Israelites finally arrived at the border of the promised land, and there Moses reminded them of their history with God. He reminded them of God's faithfulness, and of their unfaithfulness. He said to them, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." (Deuteronomy 6:4) Moses told the people to love God, not reservedly, but absolutely. He told them to love God with all that they were. He said to them:

Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse; A blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day: And a curse, if ye will not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which ye have not known. (Deuteronomy 11:26–28)

If they would love God, and keep His commandments, then God would bless them. If they hated God, and disobeyed His commandments, then He would curse them. He further said:

I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live: That thou mayest love the LORD thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he is thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land which the LORD sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them. (Deuteronomy 30:19, 20)

Moses told the people that He set before them a choice: life, or death; life for obedience, or death for disobedience.

When Moses died, He was succeeded by Joshua. Moses led the people to the promised land, and Joshua led them into it, and he led them to conquer it. Because the heathen nations were so wicked, the Lord commanded Israel to eradicate them. After Israel had conquered the promised land, Joshua did as Moses did before the people entered the land: he reviewed for the people their history, from God's call of Abraham, to the Exodus, to the conquering of the promised land. He also reviewed for them their covenant with God, and he said to them:

Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the LORD. And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD. (Joshua 24:14, 15)

As the Israelites said to Moses, so they said to Joshua, "The LORD our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey." (Joshua 24:24)

The Scriptures say that, after Joshua and his generation died, “there arose another generation after them, which knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel.” (Judges 2:10) The generation after Joshua certainly knew of God, and of His great works in the past, but, as they did not themselves did not witness such works, they had not the same love and devotion as those that went before them. They did not acknowledge Him as Lord so as to love and serve Him. The Scriptures say:

And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim. And they forsook the LORD God of their fathers, which brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods, of the gods of the people that were round about them, and bowed themselves unto them, and provoked the LORD to anger. And they forsook the LORD, and served Baal and Ashtaroth. (Judges 2:11–13)

The Israelites turned away from the Lord, and turned to the Baals, the gods of the heathens, and the Lord was angry with them for their treachery. The Scriptures say, “Whithersoever they went out, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, as the LORD had said, and as the LORD had sworn unto them.” (Joshua 2:15) Because they broke their covenant with the Lord, because they turned away from Him, and turned to idols, God turned away from them, and allowed their enemies to conquer them.

Because Israel were unfaithful, God cursed them just as He swore He would do. Yet, He was merciful, and faithful to His covenant promises, and so He raised up faithful Israelites who would deliver the people from their enemies, and then govern the people. But, after the judge died, Israel would again rebel, and so God would again allow their enemies to conquer them; and then God would raise up another judge to deliver them; and so this miserable cycle continued for many generations. (Judges 2:16–19)

The first three judges were Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar. The Scriptures say:

And the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, when Ehud was dead. And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, that reigned in Hazor; the captain of whose host was Sisera, which dwelt in Harosheth of the Gentiles. And the children of Israel cried unto the LORD: for he had nine hundred chariots of iron; and twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel. (Judges 4:1–3)

After Ehud died, the Israelites, according to pattern, rebelled against the Lord. So, the Lord caused Jabin, King of Canaan, and Sisera, the commander of his army, to conquer them. For twenty years, the Israelites were oppressed by Jabin, and they, in their misery, cried out to God for relief. God heard their pathetic cries for help, and He would help them. The Scriptures say:

And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time. And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in mount Ephraim: and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment. And she sent and called Barak the son of Abinoam out of Kedeshnaphtali, and said unto him, Hath not the LORD God of Israel commanded, saying, Go and draw toward mount Tabor, and take with thee ten thousand men of the children of Naphtali and of the children of Zebulun? And I will draw unto thee to the river Kishon Sisera, the captain of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude; and I will deliver him into thine hand. (Judges 4:4–7)

Deborah was a prophetess who judged the cases of conflicts among the Israelites, and God raised her up to deliver Israel from their enemies. At God's command, she summoned one Barak to raise an army of ten-thousand men to fight the army of Jabin, commanded by Sisera, which included nine-hundred iron chariots. God would draw Jabin's army to meet Barak's army, and God would ensure that the engagement would end in Jabin's defeat. Barak agreed to do as God commanded, but he asked the prophetess to accompany him as her presence would give him greater confidence. Deborah agreed to go with him, and she assured him of victory. Yet, the honor of killing Sisera would not go to Barak, but to a woman.

When Sisera saw that Barak gathered an army at Mount Tabor, Sisera gathered his chariots, and his soldiers, to meet the Israelites in battle. Deborah said to Barak, "Up; for this is the day in which the LORD hath delivered Sisera into thine hand: is not the LORD gone out before thee?" (Judges 4:14) Deborah the prophetess told Barak that the time had come to fight, and she gave him the assurance he needed. The two armies engaged in battle, and, although the army of Sisera was superior, the Lord caused the army of Israel to rout them. The army of Israel destroyed the army of Jabin, but Sisera escaped.

Sisera fled the battle, and took refuge in the tent of one Jael, of the tribe of Kenites, who were friendly to Israel. Sisera hid himself under a blanket, and told Jael that, if anyone should ask if he was there, she should say that he was not. While Sisera slept, Jael took a tent peg, and, with a hammer, she drove the tent peg into Sisera's temple, killing him instantly. When Barak arrived at the tent, Jael showed him Sisera's corpse. The Scriptures say, "So God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan before the children of Israel. And the hand of the children of Israel prospered, and prevailed against Jabin the king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin king of Canaan." (Judges 4:23, 24) After the defeat of Jabin, Deborah and Barak sang a song of victory, and of praise to the God who delivered them from their enemies. (Judges 5) Sadly, Israel again rebelled against the Lord, and the vicious cycle continued.

It was no different for Israel in the time of Jesus. All Israel awaited the coming of the Messiah, but, when He came, not everyone received Him; many in Israel, including many of the religious leaders rejected Him. So, Jesus said that a great judgment would come upon Israel, a judgment concerning which Daniel the prophet had prophesied five-hundred years before. (Daniel 7:24–27) Jesus said that, before His generation died out, armies would lay siege to the city of Jerusalem, and destroy it, and the temple in it. And so it happened, forty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Roman army destroyed the city of Jerusalem, including the temple, and, according to Josephus, the Jewish historian who lived in Jerusalem at the time, over one-million people were killed, and nearly one-hundred thousand enslaved. The Jews murdered Christ, the greatest treachery of all the treachery of Israel, and so God cursed them with destruction.

God did judge the Jews of Jesus' time, and He condemned them for their rebellion. Yet, the Jews are not alone in rebellion. Many Gentiles have, too, rebel against God, and against His Christ, and there will be a final judgment of all mankind. Jesus said, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him." (John 3:36); and again, "Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation." (John 5:28, 29) The Christian is no more exempt from judgment than the people of ancient Israel, for the very reason that they are all God's covenant people. A person must, if he would pass Christ's judgment, not merely believe in Jesus, but persevere in faith and good works. To this point, Jesus told the parable of the talents. He compared the kingdom of heaven to a man who was about to travel to a distant country. Before he departed, he entrusted his wealth to his servants. He gave each one money according to his ability. He gave to

one five talents, to another two, and to another one. Then he went on his journey. The servant with five talents used them to make five more. The servant with two talents made two more. The servant with one talent buried his in the ground. After a long time, the master returned, and demanded of his servants an accounting of the wealth he had entrusted to them. To the two servants who increase his wealth, he said, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord." (Matthew 25:21) The one who buried his talent said his master is unfair, and expects too much, and so, fearing him, he hid his talent so that he might at least return what was entrusted to him. His lord was angry with him for his mischaracterization, and he commanded that the one talent be given to the servant with ten. Jesus said, "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 25:29, 30) Jesus died, and rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven to receive His kingdom. In the meantime He has given to His people spiritual gifts, not the least of which is the gift of the Holy Spirit, and He expects His people to make use of those gifts for the advancement of His kingdom, and for His glory. Those who squander these gifts, those who do not put their gifts to good use, those who do not persevere in faith and good works, Jesus will, on the Day of Judgment, condemn, and punish. Jesus will have them cast into outer darkness where they will forever mourn their miserable condition. Those however, who are faithful stewards of their gifts, who do put their gifts to good use, who persevere in faith and good works, proportion to their abilities, Jesus will on the Day of Judgment commend, and reward.

Saint Paul wrote to the Thessalonians concerning the impending destruction of Jerusalem, and he warned them about spiritual sloth and complacency. The Thessalonians knew, no doubt from Jesus's Olivet Discourse, that judgment would catch many unaware. They would think that all was right in the world, and that they were right with God. Yet, destruction would suddenly come upon them, like a thief in the night. The Thessalonians were not unaware, however; they were children, not of darkness, but of light. Concerning their moral behavior, they did not sleep, but were wide awake and active. So, Saint Paul exhorted them to be watchful, and to have their wits about them, not drunk with the pleasures of the world. He told them to protect their hearts with faith in God, and love of God and man, and their heads with the hope of salvation. He told them to keep in mind that God had not appointed them to wrath, but to salvation, which was achieved by Jesus Christ who died for them so that they might be forgiven of their sins and forever live with Him. He told them with these thoughts to comfort themselves, and to encourage each other. Saint Paul wrote these things to the Thessalonians concerning the coming judgment upon Israel. But the principle of spiritual diligence, of perseverance in faith and good works, applies to all Christians at all times.

Let us learn from the history of ancient Israel. Let us understand the promises, and obligations, of our covenant with God. Let us be good stewards of the gifts that God has given us.

Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy; to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.