

Message #41

Joshua 24:16-28

When does God refuse to demonstrate grace to His people? For example, in the N.T. we read that there is a sin unto death (I John 5:16). There is a sin a person could commit as a believer and when the believer crosses that line and commits that sin, God takes him home. Where is that line?

All of us who know the Lord can testify of the amazing grace of God. We have all personally experienced it. We come to Christ and every now and then we fail and then we confess the sin and God is gracious and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. But when do we cross a line in which God will not be gracious anymore and instead be so angered that He decides to punish His own people?

In I Corinthians 10, the Apostle Paul uses Israel as an example in warning the Church. He lists specific sins that can try the Lord to the point that He destroys His own people, even in the Grace Age. Those sins were: 1) Craving evil things (I Cor. 10:6); 2) Idolatry (I Cor. 10:7); 3) Immorality (I Cor. 10:8). We are saved by Grace and we live by Grace but if we cross certain lines, God's grace can be turned to God's anger and He can and will punish His own people.

As Joshua neared the end of his life, he was thinking about this point. Joshua 24 is the final chapter in the book of Joshua and it is the final chapter in the life of Joshua. Joshua is a book of blessing. Israel experienced one victory after another, but just before Joshua died, he warned Israel that just as God had blessed these people, He could also curse them and destroy them.

As we come to these verses, Joshua had just got done telling the nation that he and his family would serve the Lord. It really revved up the crowd and they had been emotionally moved. But emotional responses are not the same as true commitment. In the emotion of a moment, one may make some decision, only to go back on the decision very soon. Joshua knew of that tendency and so he has a strong message to communicate.

WHEN GOD'S PEOPLE HAVE SEEN GOD DO WONDERFUL THINGS AND HAVE EXPERIENCED WONDERFUL BLESSINGS AND HAVE PROMISED TO BE FAITHFUL TO GOD AND SERVE HIM AND THEN THEY GO BACK ON THEIR WORD, GOD WILL TURN FROM BLESSING HIS PEOPLE TO HARMING HIS PEOPLE.

God's grace covers a multitude of sins. But God's grace has limits. When one has experienced the blessings of God and then turns from God, life will not be favorable or pleasant. God can turn triumph into tragedy. God can turn prosperity into poverty. God can turn health into sickness. God can turn life into death. God can turn success into sorrow. Just as God can build us up, so He can break us down. That is clearly the warning Joshua gave to Israel.

Now in this passage there are four actions that occur:

ACTION #1 – The people favorably respond to Joshua. **24:16-18**

Here is the kind of response that true leaders dream about. Everyone loves the message and promises they will obey it. In fact, Israel was so moved at Joshua's challenge that they responded by saying that forsaking God and serving other "gods" was far from them. They would never think of doing that.

They emotionally feel as if the possibility of them forsaking God and serving other "gods" is far removed from them. This was exactly the same emotional thing Peter experienced when he said he could not possibly deny the Lord. He was willing to fight for Him and die with Him. What one promises on the spur of the moment is not necessarily what one will ultimately do.

The real test of faithfulness is not emotions, words or reactions, or even some victory. The real test of faithfulness is time. Endurance over time proves faithfulness.

I don't put much stock in emotional responses. I have seen too many emotional responses that don't pan out. I know of a man who used to cry over his sin and say he got right with God and then do it again. He would stand up every now and then in church and give testimony of how God had worked in his life and then he would fail and do it again. He would cry and carry on and the people would be right with him and this happened time and time again. In fact, if I were to mention this guy's name to some people they would laugh because they know it isn't real.

I witnessed a manipulation of young people one time in which many were emotionally moved by what was said and many were crying. Someone said to me, what a powerful thing. My response was "maybe." Time will tell whether or not this was real or emotional.

Now the children of Israel had three good reasons for saying they would always serve God:

Reason #1 - Because God had delivered Israel from Egyptian slavery. **24:17a**

Reason #2 - Because God had preserved Israel with miraculous protection. **24:17b**

Reason #3 - Because God had delivered Israel from all enemies. **24:18**

These people were thinking about all of these blessings and they said to Joshua, you have nothing to worry about for we will serve the LORD for He is our God.

In other words, there is no way we will ever forget about all we saw God do. But things can quickly change.

We who know the Lord need to take an honest look from time to time as to where we are in our relationship with God. We can testify that we have seen God deliver us from the bondage of sin. We have seen God provide for us and protect us. We have seen God destroy some of our enemies.

Yet if God's people aren't careful, they can be lured right back into a world from which they were saved. Many of us can testify of believers who at one time seemed to be on fire for God, but now are nowhere to be seen. Their prayers and promises seemed so sincere, but they were ultimately weightless. They promised this and that and then testified of all God had done and then fell right back into the sin. What a tragedy.

ACTION #2 – Joshua seriously warns the people. **24:19-20**

Old Joshua knew about people and he knew about God. He sensed real danger. He was not some gullible leader who would fall for emotional hype. This is an old soldier who could not be swayed by emotional hype. He saw the self-confidence Israel had. Joshua knew these people were fickle.

In **verse 20** he says my fear is that you will “forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods.” Joshua says you can make all the self-confident promises you want, but my fear is you will not follow through on what you are promising.

In fact, he gives a key lesson in theology when he says, “you will not be able to serve the LORD.” You don't realize how holy He is. You don't realize how sinful you are and how far short of His glory you have fallen. You cannot keep the Law on your own. You cannot possibly be as holy as God by your emotional promises. You will need His sovereign help. You will need to depend on Him. This would be the precise problem. These people would not depend on God, but themselves.

Now Joshua wants the people of Israel to know how serious it is to turn from serving God to other gods. There are five warnings he gives them:

Warning #1 - God is a holy God. **24:19a**

Warning #2 - God is a jealous God. **24:19b**

Warning #3 - God will not forgive your transgression or sins. **24:19c**

Warning #4 - God will turn against you and do harm. **24:20a**

Warning #5 - God will consume you. **24:20b**

It is clear that God can do wonderful things for His people or He can do bad things.

We live in a day and age when almost every believer wants to hear about a God of love and grace. People want to hear about a God who would never do anything negative. They want no warnings or threats. But if we are honest with the Bible, we cannot miss the warnings that God gives to His own people.

If God's people decide to turn away from God and plunge back into their old lifestyle, God's blessings can be turned into God's cursing.

ACTION #3 – The people emotionally respond to Joshua's warnings. **24:21, 24**

The people were all charged up and said, Joshua you have nothing to worry about because “we will serve the LORD.” We will obey God. This all sounds so good, so sincere, so emotional, so loyal. This would be like a massive altar call in which people all come forward and say we are dedicating ourselves to God.

But it wasn't reality. It would not be long until Israel would be doing exactly the opposite of what she promised not to do. They did not take direct action.

ACTION #4 – Joshua gives his final response to the people. **24:22-28**

There are seven final messages:

Final Message #1 - Joshua says you will become your own witnesses against yourselves. **24:22**

Final Message #2 - Joshua tells the people to put away foreign gods. **24:23a**

Final Message #3 - Joshua tells the people to incline their hearts to God. **24:23b**

Final Message #4 - Joshua made a covenant with the people. **24:25**

This is a covenant agreement between Joshua and the people and God. If they did right they would be blessed, if not they would be cursed.

Final Message #5 - Joshua shows the people the importance of the written Word of God.
24:26a

Final Message #6 - Joshua put up a tangible reminder of God's Word and their promises.
24:26b-27

Final Message #7 - Joshua dismissed the people. **24:28**

Joshua had done everything he could do before he died. He laid it out clearly. He taught them the truth, he warned them and he dismissed them.

Joshua sensed real danger and his sense of things was well-justified. He knew these people. In a little over a one generation span from the time Joshua died, we read Judges 2:10-12. Then, about 300 years later we read the final verse of Judges which says everyone was doing that which was right in his own eyes.

Here is the warning that comes straight from this text. If you have seen God do great things for you and you choose to turn back to your old lifestyles, you will anger God and your world will come crumbling down. God will not bless rebellious people. He will judge them.