

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES

Judges 2:11-22

There is an advertisement for one of the new car waxes that shows a young man who has just discovered that he has ruined the finish on his new car by using an abrasive car polish. You can tell that he is just sick about it; however, it is too late for the damage is already done. No matter how sorrowful he is, what's done is done. The consequences just aren't going to go away. In a different area, we see reports on TV of people who have contracted AIDS because they had casual sex with a person who was carrying the HIV. They are literally sick about it; however, it is too late, the damage is already done and the consequences just aren't going to go away. What you do when you don't have to will determine what you will be when it is too late.

When the nation of Israel moved into the Promised Land, they were given instructions to rid the land of all pagan influence. They did some of that – just enough to be able to live there. In fact, they even made slaves or servants of some the natives of the land. This was apparently justification for having them around. Before long, these people and their customs began to have influence on the Israelites and they became a hindrance to God's people. But it was too late. They could not undo their failure. God left them to face the consequences of their disobedience. In the lives of Christians we find the same sort of thing happening. Our failure to rid our lives of the influences of the old life (because these things help us function day to day) eventually prevent us from growing spiritually and we wind up being influenced and controlled by the things that we should have put away from us.

In the case of the Israelites, the initial sin of disobedience of not driving out the pagans lead to more and more sin that God had to deal with directly.

Spiritual Adultery – 2:11-13, 17

¹¹ Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals, ¹² and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from *among* the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the LORD to anger.

¹³ So they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtaroth.

¹⁷ Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed themselves down to them. They turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked in obeying the commandments of the LORD; they did not do as *their fathers*. Judges 2:11-13, 17 (NASB95)

We see here the first step of a path that was to last for several hundreds of years in this nation. This pattern of sin did not develop overnight; it had taken several decades. Something had changed and it was literally a generational phenomenon. There was a failure of the previous generation to follow the Lord completely since they did not eliminate the Canaanite influences as they conquered the Promised Land. That generation had resolved to be faithful to the commandments of the Lord and not get involved or be influenced by the pagan influences around them. The first problem was compounded because they had not properly trained their children to have the same resolve and commitment to God as they had to maintain spiritually purity by avoiding getting involved with pagan religious practices and beliefs.

We have a tendency to think that they probably went to the pagan worship sites and brought sacrificial offerings. My guess is that it did not start out that way. It was more of a tendency to tolerate and then accept the beliefs, superstitions, and seasonal practices of the Canaanite people. The *Baals* and *Ashtoreths* were nature gods (male and female, respectively) worshiped by the Canaanites. They were believed to control the weather and to have power to increase the fertility of soil, animals and humans. My guess is that those of the next generations were subtly drawn in by social events such as participating in pagan festivals and perhaps just

going through the motions of invoking help from “mother nature” when it came time to plant crops or if rain was needed. Considering the description of what the Baals and the Ashtoreths were supposed to control, it would appear that they had a “father nature” and a “mother nature.” We could probably name a lot of practices as well as patterns of thought and conversation that show the influence of pagan beliefs on our culture today. [Do we “knock on wood” or maybe we are concerned about a black cat crossing our path? How does walking under a ladder or breaking a mirror influence our thinking?] My guess is that most superstitions have their origins related to some pagan spiritual beliefs. We can’t image such things leading anyone to go so far as to go through some formal worship practice, but it is not too farfetched to believe that such things influence our thinking and even our actions. Which is worse, formally bowing down to an idol or letting the teachings and beliefs actually influence what and how we do things?

The danger of attributing what happens to luck, coincidence, nature, or karma is a subtle way of pushing God out of our thought patterns. If we can avoid thinking about God and His role in our lives, then we can more easily ignore his commandments and life principles.

The recent changes in the moral climate in our nation have occurred over about a 60-year time period. It happened so slowly that we had difficulty seeing what was happening until we looked back and see all the changes that have happened. Sixty years ago our national philosophy in most areas (civil rights for minorities being a notable exception) was influenced strongly by what the Bible taught. Stores were not allowed to be open on Sunday, cohabitation outside the bounds of marriage was against the law in some areas, homosexual behavior was against the law, nudity in public places such as night clubs was prohibited, abortion of unborn children was dealt with as serious crime – in other words we had legislated morality. Over the past several years we have had people try to discredit the Bible and the church and they have gained many followers so that we have, in effect, forsaken the Lord God of our fathers. We are following a different philosophy or religion. The major influences that have lead to such a disregard for God and His Word has been and are television programming and commentary. Most of the people that work in the media are either non-Christian or anti- Christian and whatever they say or write will be influenced by their basic philosophy of life. As we view such ideas and then adopt them as part of the way we conduct our lives, then we are (in effect) following a different god that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are doing exactly what the Children of Israel did – “And they forsook the Lord, and served Baal and Ashtaroth.” The consequences for us will be (has been) the same for us as it was for Israel – we provoke the Lord to anger.

In the case of the Israelites, they eventually did get directly involved in “pagan worship” activities and bought into the practices as part of their lifestyle. This is what happens when a nation eliminates God and true worship from its culture. They will worship something else and once the downhill slide starts, it proceeds rather quickly.

Spiritual Discipline – 2:14-15

¹⁴ The anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies around *them*, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies. ¹⁵ Wherever they went, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, as the LORD had spoken and as the LORD had sworn to them, so that they were severely distressed. Judges 2:14-15 (NASB95)

When Israel moved into the land, their enemies were terror stricken – people were afraid of them because they were recognized as being under the care of a might God. As they drifted away from God, others lost their fear of them and began to dominate them. The cycle moved from sin to judgment. I think back to the Bay of Pigs invasion, to the Korean conflict and the

Vietnam disaster, to the abortive attempt to rescue the 444 hostages who were being held by Iran, to the destruction of the World Trade Center and I wonder if we are able to stand before our enemies. We continue to have problems domestically with splinter groups and partisan politics, with public officials who operate out of self interest, with weather patterns that bring floods in one area and drought in another – and we are greatly distressed. Most people are oblivious to the problems we have and I would imagine that the nation of Israel was pretty much the same way until it personally touched their lives. That may be what has happened to us – the problems have to get so bad that enough people are personally affected that we then turn back to God. When the nation of Israel would experience conditions so bad that they turned to God, then He would send relief.

Divine Compassion – 2:16-18

¹⁶Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them. ¹⁷Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed themselves down to them. They turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked in obeying the commandments of the LORD; they did not do as *their fathers*. ¹⁸When the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed and afflicted them. Judges 2:16-18 (NASB95)

Here we see the third and fourth parts of the pattern that was repeated in Israel. They would enter into a phase of repentance and then God would send deliverance. This deliverance would come in the form of a strong leader whom God would empower to rally the people back to Himself and would lead them out of the situation and break the domination of the enemy. There was a problem in that after this deliverance happened, the cycle would start over and the people would fail to listen to the judges and they would drift off into their old ways.

The key to stopping the decline in morality and the lack of ability to defend themselves was in the strength and competence of the leaders of the nation. We could say that this was always the case for the nation. Moses was obviously a strong leader. When the mantle of Moses was passed on to Joshua, he was encouraged to be “strong and courageous.” Before Joshua died, he got commitments from the leader of the nation to be faithful to the commandments of the Lord which would require them to be strong leaders. When strong leadership would wane, then the people would drift and even run away from the paths of righteousness until another strong leader would be raised up by God. It would seem that they might have figured out that those in leadership should have been cultivating the next generation to be good leaders so that they would not find themselves on a roller coaster ride that caused them to have radical swings in their prosperity.

Divine Testing – 2:19-22

¹⁹But it came about when the judge died, that they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them and bow down to them; they did not abandon their practices or their stubborn ways. ²⁰So the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He said, “Because this nation has transgressed My covenant which I commanded their fathers and has not listened to My voice, ²¹I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died, ²²in order to test Israel by them, whether they will keep the way of the LORD to walk in it as their fathers did, or not.” Judges 2:19-22 (NASB95)

There was a basic failure to effectively pass on to the succeeding generations the values and lessons that had been learned by others who had gone before them. Every generation would have to learn it all over and they wound up going in circles (cycles) really never making any real progress in their becoming and being a godly nation. We, too, are guilty of such neglect ourselves in our personal lives and in the church and in our nation. The more we can learn from

the experiences of the past and of what others have done the better off we are.

When we recognize our condition and call upon the Lord, He hears and provides a way out. The too-often-told story of most of us is that once we have been delivered from the problems we have, we then forget what got us in the trouble and repeat the same behavior. The forgetfulness may be generational but the cycle repeats itself. With each repeat the depth of the depravity is worse until people come to the point of refusing to repent. “That which the parents ‘allow’ is practiced in excess by the children” – Bill Gothard.

When we blame God for the conditions of our lives it is because we fail to realize that our rebelliousness may be the root cause. It is rather sobering to realize that some of our chronic problems are not going to be solved and will be around from now on. None of us like to think that the difficulties we encounter in life are like the “pop quiz” a teacher springs on a class. The teacher is trying to get an idea of whether his or her teaching is being effective. In the case of God dealing with us, he knows what is in our hearts. The problem is that we don't know what is there until we encounter a problem or temptation and sometimes (maybe more often than not) we just react and fail to learn anything from what has happened. We often fail to see that the problems God has allowed in our lives are there to show us what is really in our heart and to bring us to repentance and renewal.

We should be able to learn from what the nation of Israel experienced: We need to be ruthless in our dealing with sin in our own personal lives because sin that we do not properly handle will eventually dominate us. We will be subjected to temptations and we need to realize that giving in to that temptation will bring judgment. The good news is that God still loves us and is ready to receive us back if we will turn back to Him.