

Warnings

At the very outset of history, God issued a warning. In Genesis 2:16-17, God commanded Adam not to eat from a certain tree in the Garden, **“for in the day thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die.”** Ignoring the warning, Adam ate, and he died. God carried out His warning. God’s commandment not to do something makes no sense except that the man (and, we should understand, all humans since) have the innate or prior knowledge of the need to obey God: that obedience to Him is right and necessary. Obedience is owed to Him because of who He is, Creator and absolute Ruler of all, and because His commands are all good, as He is good.

Not long after the disobedience in Genesis 3, Cain got angry at his brother Abel. **“Then the LORD said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry?...If you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it’** (Genesis 4:6-7). Cain ignored that warning and did what he wanted to do, kill his brother. The sin nature, having entered the human race, was already being expressed. It was out of kindness that God warned Cain not to sin. The Lord’s warning was partly so that punishment for sin could be avoided, but it was also so that God’s righteousness would prevail and God would be glorified. As the story makes explicit, sin has consequences. The warning was real.

God’s warnings are throughout the Bible. Deuteronomy, for example, has warnings to the newly created nation of Israel. Chapters 28-30 is an extended passage warning about disobedience. **“If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name – the Lord your God – the Lord will send . . .** [natural disasters, diseases, destruction and exile, constant danger, being given over to idolatry, etc].”

Joshua’s farewell (Chapter 23) is a terrible warning. The whole Book of Judges is one long sustained warning. The stories of the evil kings in Kings and Chronicles develop other themes, but they also certainly serve as warnings. Just prior to the Babylonian invasion, the writing prophets warned Judah of imminent disaster. Jeremiah and Ezekiel faithfully proclaimed God’s warnings. Certain of those warnings were symbolic acts (Ezekiel Chapters 4-5, and 12, for example). They were to be warning “signs” to the rebellious house of Israel. The Book of Jonah is a short but sustained warning to Israel. In fact, much of the Old Testament served as written warning to that people of God; if not explicit, the warnings are there between the lines. There are even warnings to the surrounding Gentile nations of judgment. We can easily identify three themes that run throughout the O.T., promises, failures, and warnings.

When we turn to the New Testament, we expect to find something altogether different, don’t we. We expect to see there nothing but grace. The N.T. texts must be all about God’s love for us, and the freedom that we have in Christ. No condemnation. Forgiveness of all sin. Perfect love casts out all fear. Right? No! We’re not listening. The N.T. continues to send warnings to the people of God, except that now the Church is on the receiving end, not Israel. Greater blessings and greater privileges necessarily mean greater responsibilities. There’s a massive misunderstanding among church-goers about this issue, supposing that belief in Christ is all that’s necessary to enjoy all the benefits of salvation.

How did it go for Ananias and Sapphira? They were believers. Yet Satan influenced them to lie. And God punished them with immediate death. God would not tolerate their continuing to live before Him. Their deaths were a severe warning to the Church, **“Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events”** (Acts 5:11). Fear? Is the fear of God supposed to be part of a Christian’s mind-set? *Absolutely*. Peter understood that very well: **“Live your lives as strangers here in fear”** (1 Peter 1:17). God loves His children, but He also makes demands of them. We not only must not offend our Father in heaven, we must be obedient and faithful to Him. Or else.

Jesus was demanding. **“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it...”** (Matthew 16:24-25). This was spoken to his disciples, that is, to us Christians. Matthew Chapter 25’s first 2 parables should be read on our knees: **“...the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut”** (v.10). And, **“You wicked and lazy servant! ... Take the talent from him ... And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”** (vv. 26-30).

Paul was demanding. Repeatedly he warned that Christians will have to give to Christ an account of their lives. Those are the *bema* judgment passages. Paul himself gave himself totally to serving Christ, taking enormous risks, and he wrote to the Church ten times, “imitate me as I imitate Christ.” In 1 Corinthians Chapter 10, Paul says that the bad things that happened to Israel, in Numbers for example, served as examples to us, as warnings not to do the same things (10:11). The Israelites rebelled, committed idolatry and sexual immorality, put God to the test, and grumbled against God. Paul

then writes these somber words, **“So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall.”** Evidently, we can commit the same offenses, and be punished for them. In the next chapter, Paul says we can come under judgment, **“That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment”** (11:30-31). We don’t lose eternal life, we don’t have to stand before God at the Great White Throne judgment at the end of time, but we will suffer loss in some way (v. 32) if we don’t live and serve and become as the Word of God demands.

The author of Hebrews was demanding. He issued terrible warnings to his readers, and by extension to us today, of the danger of not pressing on to maturity. Expositors continue to debate those warning passages to make them fit their theological presuppositions, but they are clear enough. The book of Hebrews has wonderful Christology, but it is also a warning to the Church, climaxing with, **“See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks”** (12:25).

James was demanding. He warns the Church against a lot of things that are offensive to God. For example, **“You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God”** (4:4), and **“Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door”** (5:9). Don’t suppose this is just hyperbole for stylistic reasons.

Peter’s warnings are not hidden. His 1st Epistle is almost one long warning to the Church. Remember, he was there when God in judgment took away Ananias and Sapphira. Peter must have been the most deeply affected of all on that day. He was probably horrified, especially if he recalled how he had denied Jesus three times after being for 3 years intimately associated with Him and witnessing miracle after miracle. Expositors think 1st Peter is all about suffering. Suffering is there, of course. But it’s related to that which is more primary: exhortation and warning to the churches. Thus, in Chapter One, **“you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come *so that your faith...may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed*”** (vv.6-7, the italics are mine). In other words, God expects us to demonstrate or prove our faith, and suffering is one way that’s accomplished. So Peter writes that if husbands in any way mistreat their wives, God won’t hear their prayers (3:7). That’s a warning. Then he quotes verses from Psalm 34, warning readers, **“Whoever would love life and see good days...,”** meaning, if you don’t want to have happen to you what happened to Ananias and Sapphira, **“must...[be careful about what you say, practice only righteousness, and pursue peace]”** (3:10-12a). And then he drops this, **“but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil”** (3:12b). He’s not writing this to unbelievers, but to the Church! He’s saying, because God judges our acts or our works, if we’re not obeying the commands in this Epistle, if we’re not practicing righteousness, if we’re not faithful in trials, we’re susceptible to [temporal] judgment. From 3:12a, the judgment may be that God refuses to hear our prayers. God disciplines His children! Peter further warns, **“For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?”** (4:17). This judgment of a believer is not to determine eternal destiny. Rather, it is being accountable for what we do, how we live as a follower of Christ. That’s why Peter warns us to fear God.

The Bible isn’t just lots of doctrines and great stories. Why all the exhortations and imperatives there in Scripture? That material is there purposely because God wants us to live right before Him. He wants us to be like Him. And the warnings are there so that we heed those texts. The warnings are given in love; God doesn’t want to have to condemn or punish the creatures He loves. He wants us to glorify Him by our willing obedience and expression of righteousness. And to be blessed as a result. Besides, God has endowed us with free will, which means that there must be accountability for the choices we make. Justice demands it.

Punishment is a very real consequence to disobedience or rebellion. God’s warnings aren’t hollow. Israel was thrown off the Land and is suffering in Exile still. In today’s American churches, we have this bizarre notion that God is love, and that’s all there is to it. “His banner over me is love.” We obviously don’t know the Bible very well. And because we don’t, we’re oblivious to God’s discipline. Worse, we don’t even realize anything is amiss. We forfeit blessing and don’t even know what we could have had.

It’s as if we’re still living in the Garden, all of us. And we take seriously the Serpent’s lie, “you shall be as God.” In other words, “don’t allow God to determine for you what’s right or wrong, *you* decide that yourself. You can do as you please.” Well, it should be obvious that we’re NOT as God. We depend on Him for breath, for food, for light, for life, for gravity to keep us from floating off into outer space. And we need God to tell us what’s right and wrong, what values to hold, and where our affections should be. But we don’t think clearly. So we need warnings. They’re there and won’t go away. Let’s heed them to God’s great glory.