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FORSAKING SIN OR GOD?

2 Chronicles 28

By

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Kings of Judah Lesson 9

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A fourteenth century duke named Raynald III, in what is now Belgium, had a violent quarrel with his younger brother, Edward, who then led a successful revolt against him. Edward captured Raynald, but didn't kill him. Instead, he built a room in the castle around his brother and promised him that he could regain his title and property as soon as he was able to leave the room.

This wouldn't have been difficult for the average person, since the room had several windows and a door of near-normal size, and none was locked or barred. The problem was Raynald's size: he was grossly overweight. To regain his freedom, he had to lose weight. But Edward knew his older brother, and each day he sent a variety of delicious foods. Instead of dieting his way out of prison by resisting those tempting foods, Raynald grew fatter. When Duke Edward was accused of cruelty, his reply was, "My brother is not a prisoner. He may leave when he so wills."

But, of course, his brother was a prisoner--of his own appetite. He stayed in that room for ten years and wasn't released until Edward died in battle. By then his health was so ruined that he died within a year (adapted from *Leadership* [Spring, 1984], p. 44).

There is in every human heart a perverse and powerful attraction for that which you know cognitively will destroy you. It is the appeal of sin. Like bugs drawn toward a light that will kill them, fallen sinners are drawn toward the evil that will enslave and ultimately ruin them. I wish I could report that the longer you follow the Lord, the less appeal sin has, but I cannot. It is a battle that requires constant vigilance. It's a winnable war, but we never (in this life) become immune to sin.

Thus life consists of a series of choices. To put it plainly:

Either we forsake God to go after sin or
we forsake sin to go after God.

King Ahaz forsook the Lord for sin. He did so in spite of many advantages. His grandfather was King Uzziah who, although he later became proud and was struck with leprosy, was yet a mighty king who sought the Lord. Ahaz's father was King Jotham, a godly man who further strengthened the kingdom (see 2 Chronicles 27:6). Furthermore Ahaz was a descendant of King David, and thus he came under the blessings of the covenant God had enacted between David and his progeny. And if that were not enough, Ahaz lived during the ministry of the prophet Isaiah, who encouraged Ahaz to trust in the Lord. But he forsook the Lord. Let's look at his life to learn what it means to forsake God to go after sin. The chapter also reveals (from an unexpected source) what it means to forsake sin to go after God.

FORSAKING GOD TO GO AFTER SIN:

1. Forsaking God to go after sin begins by adding worldly ideas to God's Word (28:2-4).

Ahaz didn't begin his reign by closing the doors of the Temple and replacing the worship of God with the worship of idols. Eventually it came to that (28:24). But he didn't start there. He started by adding idol worship to the worship of the Lord. The parallel account in 2 Kings 16 tells of how Ahaz went up to Damascus to meet Tiglath-Pileser who had defeated the Syrians and the northern kingdom of Israel on Ahaz's behalf. There he saw a magnificent altar which he liked so much that he sent back the plans for it to his priest so that it was waiting for him when he returned from Damascus. Ahaz offered on this pagan altar the sacrifices prescribed in the Law of Moses. As for the bronze altar prescribed by Moses, he moved it aside and kept it to inquire by (2 Kings 16:15), but he offered all his sacrifices on the pagan altar of his preference. In other words, he was blending pagan ideas with what is prescribed in the Bible.

Forsaking the Lord often begins by replacing a few things in the Bible that you don't like with a few worldly ideas that you prefer. Let's face it: There are some hard truths in the Bible that confront our culture and our sinful, selfish preferences. The Bible says that wives are to be subject to their husbands and workers at home (Titus 2:5), but we don't like that; we prefer the egalitarian model. The Bible says that our marriage commitment is to be for life and

that we are to work through our problems by learning to deny self and love as Jesus loved. But that's too hard, so we bail out! But we begin forsaking the Lord when we replace the clear directives of His Word with the best of worldly wisdom or custom.

2. Forsaking God to go after sin means doing what I think will be good for me, even if it's harmful to others (28:3).

Ahaz burned some of his sons in the fire as an offering to the god Molech. In some cases this involved slaughtering the child and offering him up as a burnt sacrifice; at other times it meant passing the child through the fire without killing him. At the heart of that sort of abomination was self, because the parent was seeking to placate the gods so that it would go well with him. Never mind that it wasn't going too well with the child! The main thing is *my* well being, even if it means my child's pain or death. But it was detestable in God's sight (Jer. 32:35).

Did you know that 95-97 percent of the abortions in our land are performed strictly for convenience? It would inconvenience the lifestyle of the mother or couple to take on the responsibility of caring for a child, so instead they slaughter that little life that is no different than you or I, except that it's younger than we are.

I realize that there are difficult situations and that because of the irresponsibility of many young men, the burden often falls on the woman. I am not insensitive to the hardship nor excusing the man. But I'm saying, if you do what you think is best for you to the disregard, or even death, of others, you're simply doing what these pagans did in offering their children to idols in the hopes of having a happier, easier life. You're forsaking God for self.

Did you know that one of our candidates for U.S. senator in next month's election is a former president of Planned Parenthood of Northern Arizona? I don't care if you're a member of his political party or if you prefer his views on the economy. To vote for such a man when his opponent is a strong advocate of protecting human life in the womb is to sin against God. Do your homework and vote for pro-life candidates!

Thus forsaking God to go after sin begins by adding worldly ideas to the Word of God. It means doing what you think will be good for you, even if it's harmful to others.

3. Forsaking God to go after sin means turning to the world for help (28:16, 22-23).

When people turn away from God, He graciously sends trials so that, hopefully, the sinner will turn to God for help. Every trial is designed by God to teach us the futility of trusting in ourselves or in the world's wisdom, so that we are driven to trust in God alone. Yet today, millions of Christians are turning to the pagan ideas of psychology for help with their trials. Several who have left this church because of my teaching on this subject have said to me, "If it's helping me with my problems and I feel better because of it, then what's wrong with it?"

What if I told you that I was feeling angry and depressed, and I went to a witch doctor. He listened sympathetically to my problems and then he mixed up a magic potion and asked me to drink it. After that, he slaughtered a chicken, dipped his finger in the blood, dabbed it on my forehead, and uttered an incomprehensible curse on everyone who had hurt me and invoked the blessings of the gods on my behalf. As he did all this, I felt my anger disappear and my depression lift. I've felt better ever since. What would you say?

The issue is never, *does it help*, but rather, *is it biblical?* Ahaz sacrificed to the gods of Aram because they helped them and he hoped that they would help him, too (28:23). We are specifically warned in Scripture against accepting the counsel of the ungodly and the wisdom of the world (Ps. 1:1; Col. 2:8). We are repeatedly told to take all our problems to God and to trust in Him alone, not in our own strength or understanding (Ps. 33:6-22; Prov. 3:5-6). When you've got problems, you've only got two options--seek help from the Lord and His Word (including biblical counselors) or seek help from the world. Ahaz sought help for his problems from the world. But before you turn to the world for help, you need to realize three things:

A. The world always exacts a high price for its help (28:21).

Sure, Tiglath-Pileser would take care of Ahaz's enemies--for a price! Ahaz had to strip the temple, strip his palace, and extract money from his princes. It was expensive and it wasn't covered by his insurance! His wives and his princes probably complained

about the stainless steel bathroom fixtures that replaced the gold, but a man has to do what he has to do when he needs help in this world!

Whenever you turn to the world for help, the world makes sure it gets its payment, and it's always expensive. Whether you go to a counselor who charges you \$100 an hour; or turn to drinking or drugs to blot out your troubles; or try to earn a lot of money so you can live the "good life" apart from God; the world gets its fee.

The irony is, it doesn't cost you anything to get down on your knees and open God's Word of truth and seek Him. It might cost you a cup of coffee to get together with a mature brother or sister in Christ and ask their counsel. Ahaz could have called Isaiah and asked for God's wisdom through him and he wouldn't have had to strip the temple and his palace or rob his princes.

B. The world never delivers what it promises (28:20, 21, 23).

Tiglath-Pileser promised his help, but after he polished off Ahaz's enemies he moved on to afflict Ahaz. In the end the help Ahaz sought proved to be his downfall. In spite of all the money he spent, he didn't get the help he needed.

The world's help is like that. At first it seems to offer what you want, but in the end it never delivers what it promises, because it doesn't direct you to the Lord. I've seen girls enter into a relationship with a nice, but unbelieving, young man. It seems as if he will bring her the happiness she seeks. But she pays a terrible price in the long run, because she disobeyed God's Word about being unequally yoked.

C. The world comes in as a friend but takes over as master.

At first Tiglath-Pileser was Ahaz's friend. He knocked off Syria and subdued Israel. But then he exacted tribute from Ahaz and in the end Ahaz was a weak vassal on a leash held tightly by the Assyrian monarch.

That's how the world works. You invite it to come in as a friend, but it's a domineering house guest! Soon it shoves your things to the corner and takes over. A man dabbles in pornography; after all, he's got needs that aren't being met! Soon he is enslaved to lust. A housewife starts having an afternoon drink to calm

her nerves; soon it becomes a morning, afternoon, and before bed drink. She is enslaved to alcohol. A young person smokes a little dope or crack cocaine because it makes him feel so good. Soon he is enslaved to an expensive and destructive habit. The world always exacts a high price. It never delivers what it promises. It comes in as a friend but takes over as master.

Forsaking God for sin begins by adding worldly ideas to God's Word; it means doing what I think will be good for me, even if it's harmful to others; it means turning to the world for help, which is no help at all.

4. Forsaking God to go after sin means incurring His discipline (28:5, 19).

If a person has an outward profession of faith, but is not truly converted (as with Ahaz), then God sends trials to bring him to repentance and faith in Christ. If the person truly knows Christ, then God disciplines him as a son, that he may share God's holiness (Heb. 12:4-11).

But in either case, we need to understand that trials do not come to us by bad luck or chance. A sovereign, loving God uses everything from minor irritations to major catastrophes to pry us loose from self-reliance, self-love, and sin and to drive us to trust in Him and to love Him and others for His glory.

In a recent *Focus on the Family* magazine Dr. Dobson said that AIDS is not God's judgment, because it affects innocent children and others, such as recipients of blood transfusions. But he's failing to understand that when God's judgment falls on a nation, it hits the so-called "innocent" (no one is without sin) as well as flagrant sinners. In Ahaz's day, the whole nation suffered because of Ahaz's sin. In our day, AIDS is God's means of judgment, but also of His mercy. The AIDS plague should make us all see the great sin of our land, not only in homosexuality, but also in many other ways. It also should make us realize that the wages of sin is death, but that if sinners will repent and turn to God, they will receive the gift of God which is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 6:23).

Even if we have not deliberately sinned, we need to recognize every trial as God's gracious means of shaping us into the image of His Son (Rom. 8:28-29; Heb. 12:4-11). Health problems, family

problems, financial troubles, car troubles, and every other kind of trial is an opportunity to grow in Christ by submitting to His loving hand and seeking Him more fervently in thankful prayer. Even Jesus, who was without sin, learned obedience through the things He suffered (Heb. 5:8). If you have forsaken God for sin, then view your trials as His gracious means of bringing you into the place of wholeness He wants to give.

Thankfully, there is an alternative to forsaking God to go after sin. Ahaz never did it, but some others in this chapter did:

FORSAKING SIN TO GO AFTER GOD:

The warriors from the Northern Kingdom who defeated Judah in battle brought back 200,000 women and children as slaves (28:8). The Northern Kingdom had not had even one godly king since the division of the land almost 200 years before. Yet God did not leave Himself without a witness in the north. In this case the prophet Oded confronted these men. Ironically, the ungodly Northern Kingdom (whose capital was Samaria) forsook their sin and obeyed God, while the southern kingdom did not. This story was no doubt behind Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan.

Oded's job was a bit like an M.P. single-handedly facing a bar-room full of drunken sailors. These guys were high on the smell of victory. But he goes out and tells them to send their captives home. His words and their response reveal three aspects of true repentance:

1. Repentance means listening to the Word of God (28:9-11).

The only way we know right from wrong is the Bible. God's Word reveals His righteous moral standards. These men heard God's Word through Oded. Ahaz had heard God's Word through Isaiah. We have it in written form. The Bible, and *only* the Bible, is our standard for right and wrong. Repentance involves listening to God's Word.

2. Repentance means acknowledging our own sin, not comparing ourselves with others (28:10).

"Do you not have transgressions of your own against the Lord your God?" These warriors from the north had just been

used to execute God's judgment on their sinful brothers in the south. They could have been pretty cocky about themselves compared with their brothers. But the prophet calls them to face their own sin. Repentance always means acknowledging your own sin, not comparing yourself with others who may be more sinful.

3. Repentance means turning from sin and doing what is right in the Lord's sight (28:14-15).

Lip service isn't enough. God requires us to perform "deeds appropriate to repentance" (Acts 26:20). A lot of people supposedly receive Christ, but there is no repentance. They don't turn from their sin and begin to obey the Lord. Repentance means that we begin to obey God, and when we do sin, we come back to Him again for cleansing and restoration. Christians are not sinless, but we should sin less as we grow in our walk with God.

Conclusion

A Native American tells a legend he heard as a boy. Many years ago, Indian braves would go away in solitude to prepare for manhood. One saw a rugged peak and thought, "I will test myself against that mountain." He put on his buffalo-hide shirt, threw his blanket over his shoulders and set off to conquer the challenging summit.

When he reached the top, he felt like he was standing on the rim of the world. His heart swelled with pride at his success. Then he heard a rustle at his feet. Looking down, he saw a snake. Before he could move, the snake spoke. "I am about to die," said the snake. "It's too cold for me up here, and there is no food. Put me under your shirt and take me down to the valley."

"No," said the youth. "I know your kind. You're a rattlesnake. If I pick you up, you'll bite and kill me." "Not so," said the snake. "I'll treat you differently. If you do this for me, I'll not harm you."

The youth resisted for a while, but this was a persuasive snake. At last the youth tucked it under his shirt and carried it down to the valley. There he laid it down. But suddenly the snake coiled, rattled, and struck, biting him on the leg.

The startled youth cried out, "But, you promised--!" "You knew what I was when you picked me up," said the snake as it slithered away. (Adapted from *Reader's Digest* [6/89], p. 131.)

The next time you're tempted to embrace sin into your life, and it looks attractive and harmless, remember the words of that snake: "You knew what I was when you picked me up." If you forsake God to go after sin, as Ahaz did, you will only get stung. If you forsake sin to go after God, though it's often difficult, you will be ultimately blessed. Are you forsaking God to go after sin, or are you forsaking sin to go after God?

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the areas where the modern church is adding worldly ideas to the Word of God?
2. What's wrong with this argument: We seek the world's help in medicine; why not in psychology?
3. Some say that they've tried seeking God through the Bible, prayer, etc., but it didn't help. What would you say to them?
4. Can a person believe in Christ unto salvation without repenting of known sin? Cite biblical references for your position.

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