

THE BETTER SACRIFICE - NUMBERS 14:8,9

In July of 1976, some Israeli commandos made a very daring but carefully calculated raid on an airport in Entebbe, Uganda to free some Jewish hostages. This raid has been very well documented- many press articles have been written describing it, movies have been made documenting it, and it is generally agreed that it was this single event that did the most to give the Israelis a reputation of being experts in dealing with terrorists.

The raid on Entebbe was necessitated when 7 terrorists took 106 Jewish people hostage. The demands that were made were totally unreasonable, and the basic position of Israel is that it was unwise to negotiate with terrorists anyway- that such action just rewards terrorism and leads to more of it in the future. So a critical decision was made. In a brash move, Israeli commandos would storm the airport in Entebbe and try to free the captives by force.

The result of this courageous rescue astounded the entire world. All 7 of the kidnapers were killed, and 103 of the Jewish hostages were freed, unharmed. There were only 3 friendly casualties. A miracle, the news media wrote. But what was overlooked was the fact that there was really no need for even the 3 Jewish people to be killed.

For the commandos had the plan worked out to perfection. They would enter the airport and shout out in Hebrew "Get down. Crawl on the ground" knowing that the terrorists did not understand Hebrew. Then they would begin to immediately fire their machine guns cutting down whoever did not understand what they were saying and was left standing. And that is exactly what happened to a tee. What the commandos did not figure on were 2 hostages who understood what they had said but hesitated in falling to the ground wanting to see what was happening. And one who immediately fell to the ground when he heard the Hebrew command, but then foolishly got back up when the firing started out of curiosity. 103 hostages quickly and completely obeyed the command to "Get down. Crawl". Every single one of these people lived and was freed. 7 terrorists didn't understand the Hebrew language. All 7 were cut down by the gun fire. But 3 Jewish people heard the command, but didn't fully obey it. All 3 lost their lives with the terrorists.

There are certain times in life when it is critical to obey. Sometimes disobedience just results in some inconvenience. Other times, our disobedience can result in some injury like Tim suffering in our drama this morning. But there are also times when our obedience literally means life or death for us. Now we have many of these times daily that we have just grown to take for granted. Every time we come to a street light, for instance, our obedience is imperative. If we choose to ignore or disobey the red light warning us to stop even for one day in our lives, we will probably not make it through that entire day alive. Now in other areas of life, the importance of obedience might not be so immediately apparent. But at certain times, we either obey or else.

The one realm of life where people generally underestimate the necessity of obedience the most is in the spiritual realm. Perhaps this is because the one who gives the commands, God, cannot be seen by us. Perhaps this is because the consequences of disobedience are often not immediately suffered. Perhaps this is because we have such a strong inner desire to disobey God's commandments. But whatever the specific reason, most people don't take obedience to God's commands as seriously as they should. Yet, of all areas of life, undoubtedly the most important

area of obedience is in the spiritual realm. When Moses that great and wise leader was 120 years old and ready to leave this earth, his final words to the Israelite people were words encouraging them to obedience.

Listen to what the Bible records in Deut. 32:45-47: "When Moses finished reciting all these words to all Israel, he said to them, "Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of the law. They are not just idle words for you- **they are your life**. By them, you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess."

Caleb was a man who knew the importance of obedience to God. And part of the reason for Caleb's respect for obeying God was the fact that Caleb was able to see obedience from God's perspective- he looked at obedience through God's eyes.

We all know that obedience can be looked at from 2 differing perspectives. When a parent tells his young child to eat all of his dinner, there are 2 different views of that command. The child doesn't like broccoli- so he is looking at the command from his own preferences. The parent, on the other hand, is looking at the health and growth of the child. The child sees the immediate distaste, the parent sees the bigger picture. As that child becomes a teenager and the parent now gives a curfew to her on Friday night, again there are 2 different views of that command. The teenager wants to have a good time that evening with her friends- so she is looking the command from her own desires. The parent, on the other hand, is trying to look at the health and physical safety of her daughter. Again, the teenager sees the immediate, the parent the longer term picture. The teenager graduates from school and decides to enlist in a branch of the armed forces. His commanding officer in boot camp is quick and eager to give all kinds of commands. The soldier has the tendency to look at the immediate relevance of the orders given. The sergeant, on the other hand, is looking at discipline needed to maintain an orderly army. And on and on it goes in life. Whenever an order is given, there are always 2 perspectives on that command. One from the giver of the command, the other from the receiver of the command.

Now we see this very clearly illustrated in Israel's circumstances as they were on the verge of entering the Promised Land.

There was no question that it was God's will for the Israelites to go into and settle the land of Canaan that He had promised to give to them.

*God had reminded them numerous times of the promise that He had made to their father Abraham giving him this land as an inheritance

*God had now commanded them to enter and possess this land at this time

*God had given them the opportunity to enter the land. He had brought them out of their slavery in Egypt, delivering them from their bondage. He had given to them the law from Mt. Sinai, part of which was a constitution for a new government in their new land. He had lead them with the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night to the doorstep of the Promised Land at Kadesh Barnea. All of the circumstances that they had experienced had confirmed the command that God had given to them- namely, that it was His will for them to enter the Promised Land.

*There certainly could be no question in the Israelite's minds that it was God's will for them to enter into the Promised

Land.

*However, it is also clear from the text that the Israelite's viewpoint of this command from God was far different from God's viewpoint, and Caleb brings this out to them.

*The Israelites were looking at the command of God to enter the Promised Land as a suggestion, as an option to them. When the spies went in on their reconnaissance mission, even though they were not sent in to determine whether or not it was prudent for the Israeli people to enter the land, they took this option upon themselves. They carefully noted the size of the Canaanite soldiers, they measured in their minds the depth of the walls of the cities, they weighed the pros and the cons, and they decided that it was not in their best interest to enter the land. In doing so, they were looking at God's command as a strong recommendation to them. And they certainly would consider it carefully.

*God, on the other hand, considered his commandment from a very different perspective- and to Caleb's credit, he saw that. And this simple fact separated Caleb and Joshua from the other 10 spies. Caleb realized that God's commandment was non negotiable. Caleb viewed God's command as a direct order from the commander-in-chief of the army. So Caleb realized that to decide upon a course of action different from what God commanded would in effect be mutiny, going AWOL.

Caleb summarizes this insight in the first sentence of Numbers 14:9 when he says, "Only do not rebel against the Lord." You see, Caleb saw disobedience through the eyes of God. God does not view his commandments to us as recommendations to be considered. God views his commandments to us as non-negotiable directives. Therefore, disobedience in God's eyes is rebellion. And that is the reason for his reacting so quickly and so harshly to the Israelites when they made their decision not to enter the land.

*We can still almost hear the buzzing among the Israelites after God gave his verdict to Moses and Moses passed it on to the general community. It is found in Numbers 14:21-24: "Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the Lord fills the whole earth, not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me 10 times- not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it. But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it."

Can't you hear the Israelite community whispering? Isn't this an over-reaction? A little bit harsh isn't it, God? All of us dead, for one decision? It seems to be kind of overkill? But you see, they never did realize the significance of their action, because they never saw the nature of their obedience through God's eyes, as Caleb did. Caleb realized that disobedience to God was rebellion against him, disobedience to God was publicly showing contempt for him. One of the insights that separated Caleb from his contemporaries was the fact that Caleb understood how important obedience to God was in the Lord's eyes, he saw this character trait of obedience through God's eyes.

Now this matter of seeing obedience through the eyes of God is so critical that I want to look with you are 2 Biblical examples that further illustrate it for us- one positive and one negative- because we must see this clearly if we are to have a vibrant, living relationship with God.

a. In the first chapter of Jeremiah, we are given the account of the Jeremiah's call to become a prophet of God.

READ Jeremiah 1:4-12

JER 1:4 The word of the LORD came to me, saying,

JER 1:5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."

JER 1:6 "Ah, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child."

JER 1:7 But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. ⁸ Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD.

JER 1:9 Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."

JER 1:11 The word of the LORD came to me: "What do you see, Jeremiah?"

"I see the branch of an almond tree," I replied.

JER 1:12 The LORD said to me, "You have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled."

*God here calls Jeremiah to be a prophet

*Jeremiah has the same hesitancy that most of us would have. I am only a child. I do not know how to speak well. I am inadequate. I am not able to obey this command that you are giving to me, God.

*God reminds Jeremiah of the command that he is giving to him- to go where he sends him and to say what he tells him to say.

*Then God gives Jeremiah a vision in his mind. It is a branch of an almond tree. Having placed this image in Jeremiah's mind, God then tells Jeremiah that this is a reminder to him that God is always watching to see that his command is obeyed.

*To catch the full significance of what is happening here, we have to realize that the Hebrew word for Almond Tree is shaqed. The Hebrew word for watched here is sheqed. Shaqed, sheqed- very similar in pronunciation.

*Do you see what God is doing with Jeremiah? He calls him to be a prophet. Then he gives him his standing orders- to go where he is told to go and say what he is told to say. And then God gives him a visual reminder- a picture of an almond tree in his mind. That almond tree (shaqed) would continually remind Jeremiah that God was watching him (sheqed), and that God was concerned that Jeremiah obeys what was commanded of him.

*Happily, Jeremiah learned how important obedience was to God. And Jeremiah was faithful to the commands that God had given to him. Even though he was inconvenienced and even suffered, Jeremiah became one of the greatest prophets in the history of Israel, so that when the Messiah, the Son of God, himself came to earth, some thought that this was Jeremiah who had risen from the dead.

*Jeremiah was an example of one who took the commands of the Lord seriously and obeyed them.

b. But now look at a negative example of this principle with me.

In the 15th chapter of 1 Samuel, we find an event that took place in the latter years of Saul's reign as king.

Things had not been going well for Saul. His national security program was a failure. His nation was still living under the Philistine threat. His domestic policy was a failure. Economically, his nation was in the throes of a depression. Not much had been positive for Saul in his reign. But now Samuel comes to Saul with encouraging news. God had chosen this specific time to execute his judgment on the Amalekites for their taking advantage of the Israelites in their greatest time of weakness just after they had left Egypt. Saul was to go into battle against them, and he was guaranteed victory. But Samuel was very specific in his giving God's command to Saul.

READ 1 Samuel 15:1-3

1SA 15:1 Samuel said to Saul, "I am the one the LORD sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; so listen now to the message from the LORD." ² This is what the LORD Almighty says: "I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt." ³ Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys."

Now there was a reason for this command. This was an act of judgment by God himself. And even though we cannot fully understand all of the details of it, for only God himself knows these things, Saul was very much aware of God's command to him.

But Saul considered God's command as more of a suggestion than a directive. Saul thought that this was a wonderful opportunity for him as king to gain some good P.R., to turn around the popularity polls. If he used this victory to his greatest advantage, he might be able to foster a more positive spirit that he so desperately needed. So, instead of fully obeying God's commandments to him, Saul spared the best of everything, and King Agag himself, so that he might have a victory parade. In this way, the Israelites would be able to revel in their victory, and he, Saul, would be recognized for this great achievement. You see, Saul had a different view of obedience than God did. And God expressed his view through the words of his prophet Samuel.

READ 1 Samuel 15:17-23

1SA 15:17 Samuel said, "Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel." ¹⁸ And he sent you on a mission, saying, 'Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; make war on them until you have wiped them out.' ¹⁹ Why did you not obey the LORD? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the LORD?"

1SA 15:20 "But I did obey the LORD," Saul said. "I went on the mission the LORD assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king." ²¹ The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the LORD your God at Gilgal."

1SA 15:22 But Samuel replied:
"Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice,

and to heed is better than the fat of rams.

1SA 15:23 For rebellion is like the sin of divination,
and arrogance like the evil of idolatry.

Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
he has rejected you as king."

Whereas Saul had looked at God's command to him as a suggestion, and he had reserved the right to alter that command to what he felt was in his own best interests, God had interpreted Saul's actions as rejection and rebellion against him. Samuel even compares it to the sin of witchcraft.

Caleb saw disobedience against God in this same light. He pleaded with the people not to rebel against the Lord. And this characteristic of Caleb, being one who was fully obedient to the Lord, enabled him to become a mountain climber for God.

It is critical that we understand the nature of obedience as Caleb did- for without this characteristic in our lives, we will never be able to have the kind of relationship with God that He would like for us to have.

*We must understand the nature of obedience in God's eyes in order to become a member of God's family. When the Philippian Jailer fell at the feet of the Apostle Paul and asked him that most critical question in life- What must I do to be saved?, the Apostle Paul did not give to him several suggestions, did he? He did not tell him that heaven is as the hub of a wheel and there are many different roads to get there. Just choose your own path. No, Paul gave to the jailer a command. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. That is a command from God. There is no other way into his family. And we must fully obey that command to enter into any relationship with him at all.

*But as children of God, as members of his family, we must continue to realize how important our spirit of obedience is to him. If we simply take his word as helpful suggestions to us, if we reserve the right to overrule God's directives to us in life, then we will spend our lives spiritually wandering around in the desert. We will not make progress, we will continually be hungering and thirsting for spiritual refreshment, we will continuously be grumbling and complaining against God and his leaders, we will basically be miserable in life. By trying to rule on the throne of our life, we will become enslaved, lost in the spiritual desert. But if we recognize God's rightful place in our life, not only as savior but also as Lord, and if we choose to follow his word as explicitly as we can, if we recognize how important our obedience is to him and how much he values it, then we will spiritually enter into his perfect rest, into the land flowing with milk and honey, into that fellowship with him for which our soul longs.