

THE BAN (*Herem*)

A few weeks ago, we talked about Elijah and Jezebel. Along the way we told a more accurate account of “the still, small voice” story. Some of you already knew the full story. Some of you took it in stride; a story is a story. Some of you were upset. Who can trust “the still, small voice” if we cannot control what “the still, small voice” will tell us to do? Aye, that has always been the rub. Some of you wanted to assume that Elijah did not hear the voice correctly. Perhaps not, but you have no right to such a conclusion. “Oh yes I do! I know God would never give anyone such instructions.”

But this is the sticky wicket, loud and clear, isn't it? We don't want a dialogue with the Holy Spirit unless we can somehow remain “in charge” of the content. We only want to obey God if we get to tell God what to tell us. That is always our problem with God. And the fact remains that if we are not willing to let God be our God, we do not receive much guidance. Then out come all our illustrations of what we consider to be bad guidance. Nevertheless, and despite all our excellent arguments, God will not participate in the dialogue unless we agree ahead of time that we are the followers – that we are the creatures and not the Creator.

Two side comments:

1.) Some people really do abuse the claims of prayer. They claim guidance when it is only their own self-will. It is no secret that lots of people have discovered ways to “use religion” to control others or to get their own way. Does that surprise us? Is there any area of life where some people are not abusing the gifts and blessings? Some people eat “fast food,” so nobody should ever eat anything ever again? Some parents abuse their children, so nobody should ever be allowed to have children ever again? *Ad infinitum!* Or, to return to our tradition: After knowing the story of Jesus' experience in the wilderness following His baptism, can any of us imagine that Satan will not try to play games with our prayer lives? *Of course* Satan will try to find ways to give us false guidance. Do you know the story of a saint somewhere who did not wrestle with this reality? We have a choice: we can stop praying – stop trying to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit – or we can “grow up” and go into training.

2.) Do you think God ever cuts down the guidance we are given to match the level of awareness that we are on? Scary thought, of course. This would imply that sometimes the Holy Spirit does not try to communicate with us in the realms of absolute truth. In other words, we are always getting guidance tailored to our own level of development – to what we have a chance to comprehend – and beyond that, tailored to the real circumstances and level of development of the world around us. In my opinion, this is such a huge and difficult point that we need a few illustrations.

a.) When I was in the sixth grade, I had a personal theophany that sent me into the ministry. I won't repeat the whole story here since most of you already know it. But the vision – the scenario I was shown across the chasm – had the feeling of incredible love, cooperation, joy, and productivity, and the image was set in the context of farmland: fields, animals, barns, farm houses, farm families. When I was young, I thought this was an actual picture of Heaven. Now I strongly suspect that the Spirit was putting the message in the context of something I could understand and identify with.

b.) In the history of Israel, the time came when the people asked Samuel to choose a king for them. The account says very clearly that God did not like the idea. Apparently God was hoping that the people could skip this phase and move straight on to a better one. But God toned down the guidance to the level of the people at the time, and helped Samuel to find and anoint King Saul. It was God's will – but God's will revised to match the situation.

c.) Shortly after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples, but Thomas was not present. When told afterward that the Lord had appeared to them, Thomas refused to believe it. He said he wouldn't believe unless he could see and feel the marks of the nails and place his hand in the wound in Jesus' side. Eight days later Jesus appeared to them again, and this time Thomas was present. And Jesus said (my paraphrase), "Okay Thomas, you asked for it. Put your finger here, see my hands, and put out your hand and feel my side." In none of the other resurrection appearances did Jesus bear these marks. He had merely stooped to Thomas' need – to his request. You think Jesus will never do that for you? That the Holy Spirit will never tailor your guidance to what you can use, identify with, and comprehend, even though it will not be absolute truth on some eternal level?

d.) The most significant illustration for most of us is Good Friday. God did not cause it, but neither did God stop it. Surely a successful and complete Palm Sunday would have been God's first choice. But we are not ready for that. In any case, God does not deal with us according to where we ought to be or according to the standards of truth as it really is. So Jesus suffered and died at our hands, and those of us who notice and care suffer the repercussions of all the layers of guilt, fear, and remorse that come with that – until we are changed.

It is no vast surprise, of course, but our views of killing and dying do not easily correspond to God's. The issue for God seems to be how we feel about each other and how we treat each other. Once again we come to realize that God's real concern is relationship. But the greatest genocide of all time is the way God has designed Creation: Everything born here, dies. God knows a future awaits us, so the fact of death itself does not alarm God. If the deaths of some bring benefit or awakening to others, that is acceptable – even for his own Son. Every nation believes the same about its sons as well.

Jesus knows full well that some of His followers will be persecuted and killed for being His followers. His response is not to call off Christianity. His response is to warn us about what may happen: *“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another.... Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.... Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows.”* (Matthew 10:21-23; 28-31)

No one has mentioned these things to you before? This is only one place where Jesus is telling us, almost in the same breath, that we may be killed for following Him but not to worry – no real harm will come to us. And if you don't like the New Testament, you can find similar perspective from the Bhagavad Gita (Hinduism) and of course from Buddhism. Why does it so annoy and frighten us that some Muslims are willing to die for their God?

When I retold the story of Elijah and Jezebel and got to the part about “the still, small voice,” I wanted to tell the story like the Bible does.

I think it is important for us to realize that God does not always instruct us to do things that we think are really sweet, nice, pleasant, and ever so codependent. But some of you quickly took it to levels I was not expecting, though should have expected. So you decided that you were more faithful than Elijah, and smarter than God. That way, of course, you didn't have to deal with the real story. And you still don't have to if you don't want to. But perhaps you should give it a second look.

Elijah was as serious and sincere a “man of God” – and man of prayer – as his time had ever seen. His life was ringed with miracles. His loyalty to Yahweh was legendary. He stood virtually alone against the proponents of Baal, who were determined to take over Israel and Judah and to exterminate Judaism. Does anyone imagine that Jezebel or the priests of Baal were trying to usher in some kind and tolerant era of religious freedom? They had already killed every Yahwist prophet or leader they could find. People considered it almost unbelievable that Elijah had thus far escaped. Elijah saved Judaism from extinction. The covenants and purposes of God were saved, preserved, and continued because of Elijah. Furthermore, they were preserved because of the instructions of “the still, small voice.” And we might add: if there's no Judaism, there's no Jesus. Some of us may not like the story or the realities of the time (or of our own time either, in many ways), but Elijah was there and we were not. So we need to be a little cautious about proclaiming that we know all truth, that we know what God will and will not do, and that Elijah was a jerk – just because we hold some personal opinions about what life ought to be like.

Right now we need to get really clear about the dark side of the beliefs and expectations of Judaism. Many of us know and love some of the good parts and the great stories and the inspiring portions of Judaism. But as with the story of Elijah and “the still, small voice,” there is a darker side to Judaism that most of us do not seem to know. Or maybe we have heard about it vaguely, but we never let it attract our full attention.

Abraham was the first Jew. A covenant was enacted between God and Abraham. Covenants, seen or unseen, are the basis of all relationships. Having no covenant – no expectations, no purpose, no promises – does not evolve into strong bonds. It leads to nothing – goes nowhere and accomplishes nothing. Broken covenants are extremely painful, but that is because the stakes are high. If we start

depending on each other, we can accomplish a great deal – as long as all parties to the covenant keep up their end of the bargain. Broken covenants destroy what was possible. That is an unsung form of evil. Only, the Bible *does* call it evil. If we do not keep the covenants we make with God and with each other, we kill the dream, the promise, the possibility of a better life.

Okay, I won't trace the entire history of covenants in Judaism (or Christianity); just want to get us on the same wavelength. One more comment on this level: The Covenant was essentially that the Jews were the chosen instruments of God. They were to be a people wholly devoted and dedicated to God. As such, they would lead *the whole world* into a Covenant with God – and all the peoples of the world would thereby be blessed, as they came into the promises and favor of God. That is the beautiful and wonderful vision of Judaism. That is the meaning of the famous phrase, “A light to the nations.”

And what if this light should go out? From a Jewish perspective, it is the only viable light there is. If Judaism dies out (because the Jewish people will not keep the Covenant) or if Judaism is destroyed (because outside enemies have defeated and destroyed the Jews), the light is gone. Perhaps God will start over, but how long will that take? It is still an unspeakable calamity. And most of the time, the Jews think this cannot happen. God will fight for his Chosen People, and God will keep finding ways to chastise but also restore and reestablish “his Chosen” so that the Covenant can continue or get back into business. (This is a further insight into the mind-set of Elijah.) And some of you are possibly getting a little “crash course” in what you are reading about when you read the Old Testament.

Now we jump to Moses. Moses is the focal point of the establishment of the Covenant between God and Israel. So far so good? Alright: Torah is the Covenant. Torah is not the Ten Commandments; the Ten Commandments are an important but itty-bitty little piece of the Covenant. Torah is the first five books of the Bible – the Books of Moses, they are often called. The entire story of Judaism up to and through the freeing of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt and the enactment of the Covenant on the Holy Mountain (Sinai, Horeb) is all Torah – all part of the Covenant. All of it is instructive of what God is doing, and of the Covenant that God has established with his Chosen People.

I don't mean to be dragging it out, but that's about as fast as I can get us into the story. So now we come to the dark side of the story. It all centers around the Covenant, but the dark side centers around the difficulty of keeping the Covenant. In the modern Christian perspective, the problem of keeping the Covenant is interior. It is a psychological and spiritual problem we all have: pride, rebelliousness, fear, lack of trust, willfulness, the Seven Deadly Sins, and so forth.

But there is no hint of such a perspective in Torah. The Old Testament perspective places the problem on the outside: The problem is idolatry. The problem is neighbors. It's always nice to have somebody else to blame. Only, Torah is not kidding. Torah recognizes that we all have tendencies to be influenced by those around us. Torah knows there is a huge threat to the Covenant if we get friendly or stay friendly with neighbors who do not know the Covenant, who do not believe in the Covenant, who do not swear to keep the Covenant. Do you know what it means to be a "son or daughter of the Commandments"? Well, the very pluralism that our culture now thinks is a sign of mature and advanced development was among the greatest sins in the perspective of the Torah. And punishable by death.

So the clear instructions of Moses – coming straight from the instructions and demands of God, and as part of the condition of the Covenant itself: When you come into the land that God is giving you, you must trust that God will fight on your side and help you to drive out all the nations that are already living there. You must take over this land and dedicate it fully and completely to your God – and to a life lived according to the Covenant between you and God. You cannot become "a light to the nations" if you cannot demonstrate somewhere on earth what life will be and can be like: where people live this new and better way – where they live by this Covenant.

And now a bit of an aside. Do not imagine that the Jewish hope or expectation of that time was in any way similar to what you might think of as cooperation between peoples, nations, and religions. Judaism would become a light to the nations because once seen clearly, all people would want to be included in the Covenant – that is, they would become Jewish. (How many Christian churches do you know who believe that God will bless all people because God loves them? That God will bless all people who convert to Christianity, join the church, and start living like that church knows everybody should live – and believe. Isn't that

right? Ditto in some fashion with nearly every religion on earth.) We need to tell it straight: Judaism will become a light to the nations because all people will become Jewish. Hellenism will bring peace on earth because all people will come into the Greek Way. Jesus will be the Prince of Peace when all people on earth become Christians. Islam will have fulfilled the will of Allah when all people on earth have become Muslims. Spiritual revelation keeps coming into the world, but the ways of the world – the agenda of empire, power, and control – keep twisting the spiritual visions back into what will serve the ways of the world. (The way of the world is to seek power, survival, and success.)

So we need to be clear: Judaism will be a blessing to all people because all people will become Jewish. After all, how can God bless them unless they also learn to keep the Covenant? And if they keep the Covenant, then they are Jewish. That is what being Jewish *means*. Or it was until we started thinking that “Jewish” meant some kind of meaningless ethnic background.

I think you have the general, overall picture. So now I will simply read some passages from the Bible. Maybe you will hear them for what they are really saying. You will also notice, or should, that when people were put under “the Ban” (*herem*), it was really believed that they were devoted to God. They belonged fully to God (which is why the Jewish people could take no benefit from the “spoils of war,” as others would). Death would send the people back to God. We are not pretending this made it any less serious for Israel’s neighbors, but Israel did not see this as murder or genocide. These instructions were at the very core of the Covenant, and they were necessary to make it possible to keep the Covenant. It was a godly commandment and requirement. They were not being selfish, greedy, lustful, or prideful; they were to “dedicate” all non-Jewish people in Canaan to God. That meant kill them. Every man, woman, and child was to be put under the Ban (*herem*). This is not from Elijah; this is from Moses – who claims it is coming from God.

*When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, you shall not bow down to their gods nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces. You shall serve the LORD your God, and he will bless your bread and your water, and I will take sickness away from among you. None shall miscarry or be barren in your land;*

*I will fulfill the number of your days. I will send my terror before you and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you. I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land. And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates, for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you. (Exodus 23:23–33, ESV)*

*Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods. (Exodus 34:11–16, ESV)*

*Nothing that a person owns that has been devoted to destruction for the Lord, be it human or animal, or inherited landholding, may be sold or redeemed; every devoted thing is most holy to the Lord. No human beings who have been devoted to destruction can be ransomed; they shall be put to death. (Leviticus 27:28-29)*

*When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you – the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you – and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with*

*them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. (Deuteronomy 7:1-4)*

*If you say in your heart, “These nations are greater than I. How can I dispossess them?” you shall not be afraid of them but you shall remember what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, the wonders, the mighty hand, and the outstretched arm, by which the LORD your God brought you out. So will the LORD your God do to all the peoples of whom you are afraid. Moreover, the LORD your God will send hornets among them, until those who are left and hide themselves from you are destroyed. You shall not be in dread of them, for the LORD your God is in your midst, a great and awesome God. The LORD your God will clear away these nations before you little by little. You may not make an end of them at once, lest the wild beasts grow too numerous for you. But the LORD your God will give them over to you and throw them into great confusion, until they are destroyed. And he will give their kings into your hand, and you shall make their name perish from under heaven. No one shall be able to stand against you until you have destroyed them. The carved images of their gods you shall burn with fire. You shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them or take it for yourselves, lest you be ensnared by it, for it is an abomination to the LORD your God. And you shall not bring an abominable thing into your house and become devoted to destruction like it. You shall utterly detest and abhor it, for it is devoted to destruction. The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land that the LORD swore to give to your fathers. (Deuteronomy 7:17-8:1, ESV) [Sometimes we get a comment just in passing. It only makes it the clearer that this was the assumed and expected “will of God.”]*

*But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the LORD your God has commanded, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 20:16-18, ESV)*

*When the Lord your God exterminates the nations whose land he is giving you .... (Deuteronomy 19:1)*

*The city and all that is in it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall live because she hid the messengers we sent. As for you, keep away from the things devoted to destruction, so as not to covet and take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel an object for destruction, bringing trouble upon it. But all silver and gold, and vessels of bronze and iron, are sacred to the Lord; they shall go into the treasury of the Lord.... Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys. (Joshua 6:17-21)*

*So Joshua defeated the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings; he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded. (Joshua 10:40)*

So it isn't just Elijah. Moses is a much worse offender. Moses is the one who tells the people, in the name of God: To be obedient to God – to keep the Covenant – they must kill every man, woman, and child throughout the Promised Land who is not Jewish.

If any group of rabbis or gathering of Jews has ever made a formal statement that these and the many other passages like them or corroborating them are no longer considered sacred Scripture – that is, are no longer considered to be expressing the purpose and will of God – I have not heard about it. Have any of you heard of about such a new ruling?

I also want to be clear that this is not some kind of vendetta against Jews or Judaism on my part. Most of the religions of the world have or have had a similar attitude. Few of us are unaware of the parallels between the conquest of the Land of Canaan and the conquest of America. Native Americans in both northern and southern America have experienced the policies of extermination. And indeed, some of them have been on both ends of the dilemma.

Well, sometimes we talk until we merely blunt and dull the edges of our awareness. In any case, we think of religion as being in favor of helping and accepting our neighbors. But in Judaism, it was also sometimes a crime to be too soft-hearted and too compassionate toward neighbors. And it didn't stop with Deuteronomy. King Saul lost his kingship for not killing Agag after defeating his army. Solomon and later Ahab were excoriated for being tolerant of other religions – and for marrying foreign wives. Such acts are considered acceptable if not commendable in our time. But is that because we are more spiritual today, or because we don't think religion matters much anymore? It will be interesting to see how many of us now think we are more faithful and more spiritual than Moses.

Nevertheless, I told the story of Elijah – and extended the issues and problems again tonight – because I don't think we can fully appreciate the amazement and excitement of the Apostle Paul (as he writes the letter to the Ephesians) unless we know the background and backdrop of the Christian Gospel as it is coming out of Judaism. And in just a sentence or two, let me remind you that Paul knew this background and backdrop of Judaism probably at least as well as any man of his time. I consider it essential to remember that. Paul was rabbinically trained under one of the great rabbis of his century, Gamaliel. As nearly as we can piece together, Paul began his formal studies in Jerusalem (having come from Tarsus) from about the age of thirteen on. After his conversion and a few false starts, Paul went back to Tarsus and we don't hear from or about him for another ten to twelve years. The high probability is that Paul was rethinking and reworking everything he knew in the new light of what had happened to him on the Damascus Road. I don't mean to belabor an obvious point, but it is necessary for us to remember that although some of us may not have paid much attention to the story of Elijah, Paul had. And Paul was familiar with everything I have tried to tell you tonight. Not only was he familiar with it, but it was his religion, his faith, his people, his traditions, and his convictions. Except now, Jesus had come. And now Paul knew, up close and personal, that Jesus was the Messiah sent from God. And that was blowing all the circuits. That is what I suspect we do not fully understand. We can perhaps read Ephesians calmly and almost matter-of-factly, but Paul is trying to tell us that Jesus has changed our whole world – and all our beliefs and expectations – way beyond anything we had ever figured on or imagined. But hopefully we will hear more about that on Sunday.