

March 2015

Frank W. Nelte

## **THE MAIN PURPOSE FOR GODLY PUNISHMENT**

Most countries have many laws. Those laws were enacted because they were deemed necessary or desirable, so that society may function in acceptable ways, ensuring the rights of all citizens to equal and fair treatment. [I am here assuming the best case scenario, which we know isn't always the case.] To ensure compliance with all these laws, there are punishments attached to the transgression of these laws. Without such punishments or penalties for violation of the laws of man, people would have no incentive to obey laws that they personally don't like; and society would end up in chaos, as was the case in Israel before God selected Saul to be their king (see Judges 21:25). So when punishments for transgressions are not imposed, then the result is invariably chaos.

God has also established laws, and the transgression of the laws of God is also subject to punishments, in this case from God. But there is a very significant difference between **the reason for penalties** for transgressing the laws of God, when compared to the reason for penalties imposed for transgressing the laws of man.

As far as penalties for transgressing **human laws** are concerned:

The primary focus is on **wrong actions**, and the primary concern is to prevent such wrong actions. In the absence of wrong actions no penalties are ever incurred. The penalties for transgressing human laws are very directly aimed at preventing wrong actions or conduct or behavior. Human laws don't care about what goes on in a person's mind; only the actions count. (Under "actions" I also include speech.) This approach by human laws was summed up in the old song that had the line "brother, you can't go to jail for what you're thinking".

As far as penalties for transgressing **God's laws** are concerned:

With God's laws there is also a focus on avoiding wrong actions. But that is only a secondary focus. The primary focus for evaluating all actions, both good and bad, is on **the motivation** underlying those actions. While both of these approaches obviously work together, this primary focus always has the greater importance with all of God's laws, because this primary focus evaluates everything against the real intent underlying all of God's laws. So, brother, with the laws of God you **can** indeed "go to jail for what you're thinking", i.e. you can indeed be punished for wrong thoughts.

## **A CONSEQUENCE OF THIS DIFFERENT FOCUS**

**Right actions (Sabbath-keeping, tithing, etc.) can have a right motivation, and they can also be the product of a wrong motivation. Irrespective of the motivation, human laws will never express any disapproval when the actions are right. For human laws those right actions are an end in themselves. Right actions are always acceptable, even when they are a direct consequence of wrong motivations, i.e. even when someone does what is right (e.g. not kill or steal, keep the Sabbath, etc.) for a completely wrong reason or motivation, while at the same time still harboring a hostile attitude towards God. Human laws don't care about such wrong attitudes.**

Doing what is right for the wrong reasons is never a problem as far as human laws are concerned. Unfortunately when people come into God's Church most people tend to carry this perspective of human laws over to their evaluation of the laws of God, assuming that God's primary concern is that we

keep the Sabbath and the Holy Days and tithe, etc. Doing these things for the wrong reasons is not a problem in the minds of most people, even though that approach represents a huge problem before God.

**Wrong actions commonly stem from wrong motivations. But at times wrong actions can also be a consequence of motivations that are not necessarily wrong motivations, for example, ignorance. As far as wrong actions are concerned, generally speaking human laws make no distinction based on the motivations underlying those wrong actions. In most cases human laws don't care if no wrong motivation was involved in some or other wrong actions. The actions were wrong, and that's all that human laws take into account (in most cases, with some few exceptions) in meting out punishments.**

**As far as God's laws are concerned, there can be four scenarios:**

- 1) A **right** action can stem from a **right** motivation.
- 2) A **right** action can stem from a **wrong** motivation.
- 3) A **wrong** action can stem from a **wrong** motivation.
- 4) A **wrong** action can stem from a motivation that is **not wrong**.

These four scenarios then fall into three categories of responses from God. Those three responses from God are: strong approval, qualified disapproval, and strong disapproval. So our four scenarios above receive the following responses from God:

- 1) Right actions & right motivations = strong approval.
- 2) Wrong actions without a wrong motivation = qualified disapproval.
- 3) Wrong actions & wrong motivation = strong disapproval.
- 4) Right actions & wrong motivation = also strong disapproval.

Here is the point we need to recognize quite clearly:

When a **right action** (e.g. Sabbath-keeping, tithing, etc.) is the product of a **wrong motivation**, then before God and His laws **that right action is totally worthless** and is no better than a wrong action. This is stated very vividly by God, as recorded by the prophet Isaiah. Notice:

When we do things that are right before God from a selfish and wrong motivation, then ...

"He that kills an ox *is as if he slew a man*; he that sacrifices a lamb, **as if he cut off a dog's neck**; he that offers an oblation, **as if he offered swine's blood**; he that burns incense, **as if he blessed an idol** ..." (Isaiah 66:3)

[COMMENT: In our circumstances "incense" applies to offering prayers to God.]

In this verse **God very powerfully rejects the right actions** of people (e.g. bringing offerings to God, praying to God, etc.) because those right actions were produced by wrong motivations. In fact, God compares those right actions to other actions that are clearly wrong and despicable in the sight of God. Thus God simply does not want tithes and offerings or Sabbath-keeping or prayers, etc. from people whose motivations for doing these things are wrong. **Did you know that?**

This point is summed up in Proverbs 15:8 as follows:

**The sacrifice of the wicked *is* an abomination to the LORD: but the prayer of the upright *is* his delight. (Proverbs 15:8)**

Somebody's tithing could in fact be like "offering swine's blood" in God's sight. That is what Isaiah 66:3 is telling us. (Comment: Tithe-receiving churches don't make this distinction. They will quite gladly accept even those tithes that might be like "offering swine's blood" or like "blessing an idol" in the sight of God.) We need to understand that before God it is not enough for people to have all the right actions in their lives. Before God all those right actions are only of value if they are the products of right motivations.

Do you understand why this is so?

When the right actions are an expression of the right attitude and the right motivations, then this shows God that God can trust that mind to think like God thinks. But when the right actions (Sabbath-keeping, etc.) are produced by wrong motivations, then God is still not able to trust that individual. And since all conduct in this life is intended to show God whether or not God is able to trust us to faithfully and joyfully accept His standards and His ways, therefore any **right actions resulting from wrong motivations defeat the intrinsic purpose for those right actions**. Before God right actions stemming from wrong motivations are exactly like Isaiah 66:3; they are very emphatically rejected by God.

As far as qualified and strong disapproval for wrong actions are concerned, consider Luke 12:47-48, where both servants had wrong actions to account for.

Verse 47 applies to wrong actions with the wrong motivation, which results in strong disapproval:

And that servant, which **knew his Lord's will**, and prepared not *himself*, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with **many stripes**. (Luke 12:47)

Verse 48 applies to wrong actions without a wrong motivation (in this case ignorance), which results in qualified disapproval:

But **he that knew not**, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with **few stripes**. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more. (Luke 12:48)

What these two verses show is that before God the motivation for all our actions, based on our level of understanding, is far more important than our conduct itself. Before God the "WHY" is more important than the "WHAT". This is not to imply that conduct and actions are not important; they are important. But the underlying frame of mind, the degree of understanding, and the motivation involved are always more important.

## **A DISTINCTION BETWEEN WRONG ACTIONS**

In the first few chapters of the Book of Leviticus God gave instructions to the priesthood and to all Israel regarding five different offerings. Those five offerings are: burnt offerings (Leviticus 1), flour offerings (called "meat offerings" in the KJV, Leviticus 2), peace offerings (Leviticus 3), **sin offerings** (Leviticus 4), and **trespass offerings** (Leviticus 5).

The question is: why were there **two different types of offerings for sins**? What is the difference between a sin and a trespass? Aren't both of those categories sins, so why make a distinction?

The difference between these two categories of sins was that one involved a wrong motivation and one did not involve a wrong motivation. Specifically:

The **sin offering** was intended for people who "**sin through ignorance** against any of the commandments of the Eternal" (Leviticus 4:2). This type of sin did not involve a wrong motivation or a wrong attitude on the part of the transgressor. "Ignorance" is not a wrong attitude.

The **trespass offering** was intended primarily for **people who knew that what they were doing was wrong**, or else should have known that it was wrong. Examples given include lying about having found someone else's possessions and swearing falsely (Leviticus 6:2-3). The only "sinning through ignorance" that was included in the trespass offering was when the sinning involved "the holy things of the Eternal" (Leviticus 5:15). This was as serious as sinning knowingly in other matters, because the individual should have known better where "the holy things of God" are concerned.

To digress for a moment:

Please take careful note of this point. While generally speaking "sinning through ignorance" does not lead to the lake of fire, "sinning through ignorance **in the holy things of God**" in our New Testament age (but not necessarily in the Old Testament Leviticus 6 context) may even lead to the lake of fire in some instances. This was explained by Jesus Christ in Matthew 12:31-32. Notice what Jesus Christ said:

Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy *against* the *Holy Spirit* **shall not be forgiven** unto men. And whosoever speaks a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but **whosoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him**, neither in this world, neither in the *world* to come. (Matthew 12:31-32)

Jesus Christ said this in the context of the Pharisees accusing Him of doing miracles by the power of Satan. They really knew better! And if some of them somehow didn't know better, then they really should have known better because the evidence was irrefutable right in front of their eyes.

When an insult is directed against God Himself, then ignorance will not be a mitigating factor. God will never overlook **deliberate insults!** These two verses identify some people who will end up in the lake of fire, whether they did these things in ignorance or not! This is extremely serious. I might also mention that this is not talking about neglecting to tithe or something along those lines. We're talking about insulting God by attributing God's power to Satan.

When the holy things of God are involved, then "sinning through ignorance" is just as serious as knowingly sinning in other matters. It is **this principle** that is the reason why unconverted people are also capable of committing the unpardonable sin.

Most church members have always assumed that the unpardonable sin can only be committed by someone who had previously repented and come into the Church. That is not correct. The unpardonable sin can also be committed by people who have never in any way been a part of God's Church. "The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" that will not be forgiven (see Matthew 12:31-32) is basically on the level of sinning regarding "**the holy things of the LORD**" (see Leviticus 5:15).

Thus, for example, deliberately attributing the power of God to Satan, which is what the Pharisees had done in Matthew 12:24, is **highly offensive** against God, and that is most certainly "sinning in the holy

things of God". And in that type of offence **ignorance is never accepted as an excuse**. So people who have never been a part of God's Church are indeed capable of committing the unpardonable sin.

The establishment of the trespass offering in Leviticus 5-6 shows that even sins that were not committed in ignorance could be forgiven, because **the trespass offering implied access to forgiveness**. So even when we sin knowing better (e.g. out of weakness) those sins will be forgiven when we truly repent (i.e. change our thinking). But we need to be extremely careful that the power of God is never disparaged or imputed to Satan.

I mention this point, that even those sins that are not based on ignorance (but don't involve any insults to God's powers) will be forgiven upon real repentance, lest some people become fearful of having committed the unpardonable sin, which is overwhelmingly not the case.

In the context of Matthew 12 the sins that will not be forgiven involve openly and deliberately insulting God by attributing God's power to Satan. But in Matthew 12 Jesus Christ also made the point that some (i.e. most) sins can be forgiven if we meet God's conditions. Clearly **not all sins are equal**. And the difference between these two is primarily the underlying motivation, the mind of the sinner.

To get back to our subject:

In the Old Testament God already made a distinction between sinning through ignorance (i.e. without any wrong motivation being involved) and sinning when we know better (i.e. we obviously know better when we "swear falsely"). And it was **the frame of mind** of the person involved that determined whether some wrong action required only a sin offering or whether it required a trespass offering. The actual sin involved was secondary to the person's frame of mind (except when the holy things of God were involved).

Before God a wrong action is always wrong. But God does make a distinction between wrong actions stemming from a wrong motivation and wrong actions stemming from ignorance. And a wrong action produced by a wrong motivation always receives a greater punishment than a wrong action resulting from ignorance or fear or an impulse.

We all sin. We all fall short. None of us obey God perfectly, like Job had done (Job 1:8). King Saul sinned and King David sinned. King Saul said "I have sinned" (1 Samuel 15:24) and King David said "I have sinned" (2 Samuel 12:13). By human laws and human standards both men's confessions should have been accepted equally at face value. But that is not how this works with God. God accepted David's confession of sin, and God did not accept Saul's confession of sin. So what is the difference?

**The difference between God's acceptance of one man's confession of sin and God's rejection of another man's confession of sin is the motivation underlying those confessions. The motivation underlying King Saul's grudging confession of sin was clearly totally selfish. And selfish confessions are never accepted by God.**

With King Saul we had the right words coming from a wrong motivation. So Saul's confession was really no better than "cutting off a dog's neck" or "offering swine's blood" or "blessing an idol" (Isaiah 66:3 again).

There is a huge difference between God's laws and man's laws, when it comes to evaluating King Saul's "I have sinned" statement. Man's laws don't care whether the motivation for a confession is right and pure, or whether it is selfish. So man's laws accept Saul's statement at face value. But here is a key we should remember:

Any time a guilty person has to be reasoned with and argued into admitting guilt, such admissions of guilt are always selfish and therefore unacceptable before God! If the motivation is selfish, then the most eloquent and moving confession of guilt is without value.

Selfish confessions of guilt include the following two considerations:

1) People who eventually acknowledge guilt for those things that are already well-known and for which they cannot refute the proof that is available. People in this situation frequently continue to deny guilt for all additional wrong actions they believe cannot be proved conclusively against them. There is no value to their confession of things where their guilt is already well known.

2) People who admit guilt or responsibility for some things because **they realize** that they stand to gain from such admissions in the long term, compared to continuing to deny all guilt. They realize that **it is to their advantage to admit guilt now and "get it over with"**. This is like King Saul who just wanted to "get it over with" and to return to his former status before God. See 1 Samuel 15:24-25. This also applied to the pagan priest Balaam, who also selfishly said the words "I have sinned" (see Numbers 22:34), an obviously worthless confession. These types of confessions are very calculated, aimed at influencing "public opinion".

## THE THINGS GOD PUNISHES

Let's take a closer look at the distinction between the things for which God will punish people and the approach of human laws towards these things. Let's look at the age in which we are now living, as described for us by the Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3.

"This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be:

- lovers of their own selves,
- boasters,
- blasphemers,
- unthankful,
- without natural affection,
- false accusers,
- fierce,
- traitors,
- high-minded,
- lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God;
- covetous,
- proud,
- disobedient to parents,
- unholy,
- truce-breakers,
- incontinent (lack self-control),
- despisers of those that are good,
- heady (Greek = rash, reckless)
- having a form of godliness,

but denying the power thereof: **from such turn away.**" (2 Timothy 3:1-5)

Look at these two columns. All of these things will be punished by God, yet human laws don't care at all

about most of them. Thus:

God's laws punish those who are "**lovers of their own selves**", whereas human laws frequently encourage and even promote self-love.

God's laws punish **covetousness**, but human laws don't care about covetousness.

God's laws punish **boasting**, while human society actively encourages boasting.

God's laws punish **pride**, while human society promotes pride.

God's laws punish **blasphemy**, while human laws in most societies ignore it.

God's laws punish **disobedience to parents**, while human laws in many cases take the side of the children against the parents.

God's laws will punish **unthankfulness**, while human laws ignore it.

God's laws will punish people whose **conduct is unholy**, whereas human laws don't care about this.

God's laws will ultimately punish those who are **without natural affection** (e.g. homosexuals, etc.), something that in most cases isn't an issue for human laws.

God's laws will punish **truce-breakers** across the board, whereas human laws will only seldom get involved.

God's laws will punish **false accusers**, whereas human laws mostly don't prosecute false accusers.

God's laws will punish those who **lack self-control** (KJV = "incontinent") in their conduct, while human laws don't care if people lack self-control.

God's laws will punish those who are **fierce**, while human laws don't care about this attribute.

God's laws will punish those who **despise people who are good**, while human laws would never prosecute such an attitude.

God's laws will punish those who **betray God's people** or **God's teachings**, while human laws will only punish those traitors that are on the national level, with the exclusive motivation of national self-preservation.

God's laws will punish those who are **rash and reckless** (i.e. KJV = "heady") in their conduct, while human laws don't care about this attribute.

God's laws will punish those who are **high-minded**, while human laws don't care about this at all.

God's laws will punish those who are **lovers of pleasure** more than lovers of God, while human laws once again don't care about this either.

God's laws will punish those who have **a religious facade** (i.e. a form of godliness) while denying "the nuts and bolts" of God's way of life, where human laws generally either stay away completely from matters of religion, or else they actively encourage a religious facade.

The point is that all of the above 19 things go against the intent of the laws of God, and they are all things that God will sooner or later punish in some way. That is why Paul concluded this list with the instruction "**from such turn away**", i.e. don't get involved with any of the things in this list, because God disapproves of all these things.

Now obviously, there are no clearly spelled out specific laws in the Bible regarding penalties for being a lover of pleasure more than a lover of God, or for being a boaster, or for being without natural affection, etc. In the same way, there is no specific law that spells out penalties for "mocking the poor" and for "being glad at other people experiencing calamities" (see Proverbs 17:5); yet these things will also surely be punished by God.

All of these points here in 2 Timothy 3 are covered by the principles of "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind" (see Matthew 22:37) and "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (see Matthew 22:39). And even as "all the law and the prophets" hang on these two commandments (see Matthew 22:40), so do all of the 19 points in 2 Timothy 3, as well as statements in other parts of the Bible, also hang on these same two commandments.

These 19 points vividly illustrate the contrast between the things that God will punish for and the things human laws will punish for. These points focus mostly on character and on attitudes and motivations and intentions, with very few specific actions being singled out. In fact, many of these points can exist within a person without actually manifesting in outward actions. It is easy for people to present a facade to the outside, while harboring numerous wrong attitudes on the inside. Biblical language for "a facade" is "walking in a vain show" (see Psalm 39:5-6).

So where man's laws punish primarily for wrong actions and overwhelmingly ignore wrong attitudes and wrong motivations, God's laws punish primarily for wrong intentions and wrong motivations and only secondarily for wrong actions. With God what goes on in the mind is always more important than what goes on in outwardly discernible deeds and actions.

## **GOD HELPS THOSE WHO HAVE THE RIGHT ATTITUDE**

Because God's main concern is a person's attitude and motivation, therefore God will help those who are tempted to engage in major wrong actions without having a wrong attitude. This is extremely important for us to understand because this also applies to how God will deal with us. Let's consider some examples:

In Genesis 20 king Abimelech took Abraham's wife Sarah to be his wife, because both Abraham and Sarah had affirmed that Sarah was only Abraham's sister. No way did Abimelech intend to take another man's wife and commit adultery. We know the story. So when God appeared to Abimelech in a dream and said: "you are as good as dead because you have taken another man's wife", Abimelech replied: "in the integrity of my heart and innocency of my hands have I done this" (see Genesis 20:1-5). Abimelech had done wrong but without any kind of wrong attitude or wrong motivation.

God acknowledged this when God said in the dream: "yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart, for **I also withheld you from sinning** against Me; therefore **I suffered you not to touch her**" (Genesis 20:6).

The point here in our context is that God helped a person, who had the right attitude, to avoid a major sin. In the sight of God committing adultery with another man's wife or with another woman's husband is a major and extremely serious sin, one that God punishes severely (God threatened to kill Abimelech).



Because Abimelech was acting in integrity of heart, therefore God warned him by telling Abimelech the facts (i.e. Sarah is another man's wife).

**God will do exactly the same for you and for me when we in the integrity of our hearts might innocently get involved in some or other major sin. Don't expect God to appear to you in a dream, because that won't happen. But God will see to it that you and I are somehow and in some way warned or made aware of the real danger of the major sin involved in what we are naively about to get involved in. Someone will say something, or we read or hear something, or some or other situation opens our mind to the real facts of the situation; and then, if we proceed anyway, then we will no longer do so in the innocency of our hearts!**

Consider how God warned King David.

David very politely asked a very rich man named Nabal to give him and his men some food supplies. This is recorded in 1 Samuel chapter 25. Nabal not only refused to help David, but did so with considerable disdain for David. David took this as a personal insult and was livid with anger. So he took 400 armed men and intended to utterly destroy Nabal's family and all his possessions. This would have amounted to cold-blooded murder! Simply because the fool Nabal had offended David, that did not justify David wanting to kill every male in Nabal's household. We can't just go around killing everyone who happens to offend us.

David was on the verge of committing a major sin!

We all know this story also. Nabal's wife Abigail interceded. Notice what Abigail said to David: "... seeing **the LORD has withheld you from coming to shed blood and from avenging yourself** with your own hand ..." (1 Samuel 25:26). She continued to say that David would surely be the next king, and then "... this shall be no grief unto you, nor offense of heart unto my lord, either **that you have shed blood causeless** or that my lord has avenged himself ..." (1 Samuel 25:31).

Abigail very respectfully told David that he had no justification to kill anyone, that he would be in serious trouble before God if he proceeded and did kill Nabal and his household. She warned David to reconsider what he intended to do.

David immediately recognized that Abigail was right, and that it would be a major sin for him to carry out his intentions. But David also recognized that God was the One who had motivated Abigail to come and warn him. As David said:

"... **Blessed be the LORD God of Israel, which sent you this day to meet me:** And blessed *be* your advice, and blessed *be* you, who has kept me this day from coming to *shed* blood, and from avenging myself with my own hand." (1 Samuel 25:32-33)

Later Nabal had a stroke or heart attack and died 10 days later (1 Samuel 25:37-38). Upon hearing this news David said: "blessed be the Eternal who ... has **kept His servant from (committing) evil** ..." (verse 39).

Initially David had acted on impulse because he had been provoked. But David still had a basically right attitude. So God sent David a warning. This warning helped David to clearly grasp the ramifications of what he very impulsively was about to do. Had David then gone ahead and killed Nabal anyway, he would have done so with a wrong attitude. But David listened to the warning God had sent him.

God will do the same thing for us.

Have you ever been tempted to impulsively respond to something someone else had said or done to you? You didn't think it through because you felt entitled to respond a certain way based on what had been said or done to you. But if you viewed your intended course of action objectively, you would have realized that your intended response was not right before God. But you just didn't think the matter through.

And then, just before you could carry out your foolish intentions, someone said something or did something, or something happened, and suddenly you could see quite clearly that what you intended to say or do would be wrong before God. And you stopped in your tracks. Has something like that ever happened to you? If it has, then **that was God's spontaneous warning to you**, because God could see that your overall attitude was right, but you were about to respond rather foolishly and impulsively to some or other provocation. **God was giving you the chance** to still avoid doing something wrong.

Now if God does send us some kind of warning in a situation like that, and we don't heed the warning, or we don't want to listen to the warning, and we go ahead with our wrong response to whatever the provocation (or the temptation) was, **then** God will surely punish us, not only for our wrong action, but especially for our wrong attitude in not listening to the warning God had sent us.

## **THE EXAMPLE OF ELI**

That is what happened with the priest **Eli**, whose sons were grievously and selfishly misusing their positions as priests. As 1 Samuel 2:17 says: "wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before the Eternal". So then there came a man of God to Eli, who gave Eli a message from God. See 1 Samuel 2:27. Through this servant of God, God warned Eli: "wherefore kick you at My sacrifice and My offering, which I have commanded in My habitation; and **honor your sons above Me ...**" (1 Samuel 2:29).

Eli did nothing in response to this severe warning. God then sent another devastating warning through the young boy Samuel. Eli pressured Samuel to tell him every word that God had said to young Samuel. And so it says:

And Samuel told him every whit, and hid nothing from him. And he said, **It is the LORD: let him do what seems him good.** (1 Samuel 3:18)

This was **a terrible response** from Eli! God gave Eli a scorching warning, and Eli responds with: "that's okay because I am not going to do anything to correct my sons". Eli's response was offensive to God! God wanted Eli to change and to correct his sons, and Eli instead did nothing at all, with a "que sera sera" attitude.

Whenever God in some way warns us of impending punishments, God's purpose is always to get us to change from our evil ways. God never wants a "do what seems good to You, Lord" response! If we don't respond to a warning of impending punishments that God has sent us, then the punishments only become greater and more severe.

Not responding to a warning God has sent us in itself carries an additional penalty from God. We become accountable for every unheeded warning that God has given us. The more warnings we receive, the more severe that ultimate punishment is going to be, because not heeding a warning from God is always without fail a sign of **a wrong attitude towards God**. And a wrong attitude towards God always incurs a severe penalty.

Eli's response in 1 Samuel 3:18 was an extremely bad response.

## **GOD WILL ALSO WARN US**

When God wanted to warn Abimelech, there was no "man of God" who could have been sent to Abimelech. At that time Abraham was the only "man of God" around, and it was Abraham's wife that was involved in this matter. Therefore God appeared to Abimelech in a dream.

Later, when God wanted to warn Eli, then God sent first "a man of God" to Eli, and then God sent Samuel to Eli. From then onwards God sent his servants to kings and to the people of Israel, with warning after warning. God sent Abigail to warn David.

The pattern is quite clear.

When God wants to warn us because we are about to do something foolish, where we haven't really thought through the consequences our intended actions will have, then **God will send someone to us to warn us.**

That has happened to every member of God's Church at various times. It is God's way of working with us. The question is: do we actually recognize God's warnings? I don't mean general warnings and admonitions that are recorded in the Bible. I mean, do we recognize when God sends us individually a personal and very specific warning? David recognized that it was God who was warning him through the person of Abigail.

God can use anyone to present a warning to us, including people who may not even be in God's Church. How we respond to warnings that are presented to us constitutes a test of our integrity. David's response showed that he was still a man of integrity. When we reject warnings because in some way or other we don't like the messenger, then such rejections make a dent in our integrity. Later **it will then be painful** to remove that dent.

Consider when David allowed Satan to provoke him into numbering Israel, to establish the exact size of his military might. Notice the account in Chronicles.

And David said to Joab and to the rulers of the people, **Go, number Israel** from Beersheba even to Dan; and **bring the number of them to me**, that I may know *it*. (1 Chronicles 21:2)

The problem here was that David was starting to put some reliance on the size of his army, instead of relying solely on God. This approach neglected what God had revealed in the days of Moses, that the size of any military force was totally and completely immaterial, since God would always back His people if they were faithful to God.

And **five of you shall chase an hundred**, and **an hundred of you shall put ten thousand to flight**: and **your enemies shall fall before you** by the sword. (Leviticus 26:8)

David's demand that Joab go and number Israel represented putting his trust in military might. David was about to act foolishly. So God used Joab, a totally unconverted man, to warn David.

And Joab answered, The LORD make his people an hundred times so many more as they *be*: but, my lord the king, *are* they not all my lord's servants? why then doth my lord require this thing? **why will he be a cause of trespass to Israel?** (1 Chronicles 21:3)

Even Joab could see that this request from David was wrong before God. But this time David did not

recognize that it was God who was warning him through Joab. **David no longer liked Joab**, who still had David's letter to have Uriah killed in battle in his possession, something that had prevented David from taking any action against Joab when Joab had very despicably murdered Abner (2 Samuel 3:27) and later also Amasa (2 Samuel 20:9-10). Joab could potentially have used that letter to blackmail David. So now David forcefully rejected Joab's 100% correct advice regarding numbering Israel.

David's rejection of Joab's good advice led to 70,000 men of Israel dying from a pestilence (1 Chronicles 21:14). It was a costly mistake. As David himself then said, "I have done very foolishly" (1 Chronicles 21:8).

The lesson for us here is that whenever we reject a warning God has sent us, because we don't like the messenger, then **the consequences will always be painful**. That is always the case.

For example:

For several years before 1974 one minister had tried to point out to Mr. Armstrong that his counting for a "Monday Pentecost" was biblically incorrect. But in this case **Mr. Armstrong didn't like the messenger**. And so Mr. Armstrong referred to that messenger somewhat disparagingly as "a young man with an inferiority complex". And Mr. Armstrong refused the evidence that Pentecost always falls on a Sunday, and never on a Monday.

This rejection of a correct understanding regarding how to count for Pentecost adversely affected the Church of God. When it became totally untenable for Mr. Armstrong to continue to deny the evidence against Mr. Armstrong's counting for a "Monday Pentecost", then Mr. Armstrong eventually phoned a personal acquaintance in Israel, who was well-versed in biblical Hebrew; and based on a five-minute phone conversation with that personal acquaintance Mr. Armstrong then accepted that Pentecost can never be on a Monday.

So Mr. Armstrong had rejected many hours of evidence from a minister in the Church, but he readily accepted a five-minute conversation from a totally worldly person as adequate evidence for the point "the young man with the inferiority complex" had tried unsuccessfully for several years to get Mr. Armstrong to accept.

As with King David's rejection of Joab's good advice, which advice in reality constituted a warning from God for King David, so Mr. Armstrong had rejected the good advice from the minister (who died many years ago now), which advice had also constituted a warning from God for Mr. Armstrong. That warning was that the Church was not keeping Pentecost on the correct day of the week because Mr. Armstrong had made a mistake in counting.

And even as David's rejection of Joab's advice resulted in serious problems for David and for the whole nation of Israel (i.e. 70,000 people died), even so Mr. Armstrong's rejection of evidence that his way of counting for Pentecost was clearly wrong resulted in serious problems for Mr. Armstrong and for the whole Church (i.e. it led to serious divisions in the Church). Yes, the consequences of Mr. Armstrong's lengthy rejection of evidence against his own flawed way of counting were painful for the Church.

Now I am not writing this to find fault with Mr. Armstrong. The point is that **every member of God's Church has at one time or another rejected warnings that God had sent to us through other people**; and then we had to suffer the painful consequences for having rejected those warnings. That has happened to all of us, because God treats us all equally, warning us when we are naively about to do something foolish. What God did for King David and for Mr. Armstrong, God also does for you and for me.

The real issue is: when that happens, do we recognize that the warning is coming from God, or do we just see it as coming from someone whom we don't really like particularly much, like ancient King Ahab who didn't like Micaiah the son of Imlah (see 1 Kings 22:8-18)?

The point is that **many times all of us will fail to recognize that God has sent us a warning**, to stop us from doing something wrong or foolish. David recognized God's warning when it came through Abigail, but David did not recognize God's warning when it came through Joab. The chances are that all of us have at times recognized and then heeded a warning, which warning had really come from God; and at other times we have not recognized and then not heeded a warning that had also come from God. In this regard we are no different from King David and from Mr. Armstrong.

And the consequences of rejecting any warnings from God are always painful. They were very painful for the high priest Eli. And they are painful for us. God will always punish us when we reject His warnings.

### **FOCUS ON THE WARNING, NOT ON THE MESSENGER**

This is easy to say but hard to do. When we are about to do something foolish or even plain wrong, and we then in some way receive a warning to not do what we are about to do, in most cases most of us don't actually recognize that it is God Himself who is presenting that warning to us. And so in most cases all of us focus on the messenger, the person who presented that warning to us.

Some messengers we like because of who they are and how we normally interact with them (think of Abigail), and other messengers we don't like (think of Joab). Not liking certain messengers may be because of past negative interactions with those messengers, or it may be because we don't like the messenger's approach or bluntness (think of Micaiah).

Either way our focus can very easily be on the messenger. And we don't actually see the real author of that warning, who is God. We don't see that it is God who is warning us to not engage in something that is wrong or foolish. We don't see that it is God who wants to protect us from painful consequences of what we foolishly or impulsively intend to do. And so we then sometimes take out our frustrations or resentment on the messenger.

What we don't understand in that type of situation is that the principle of Matthew 25:40 applies to how we respond to the messenger.

And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch **as ye have done *it* unto one of the least of these** my brethren, **ye have done *it* unto me.** (Matthew 25:40)

It is like God told Samuel:

And the LORD said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto you: for **they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me**, that I should not reign over them. (1 Samuel 8:7)

And we don't recognize that we ourselves are personally and individually reacting in exactly the same way that ancient Israel responded to the long line of prophets that God had sent to them with warning after warning. Mostly we don't like it when we are told to change or to desist from something we would like to do. The warnings we receive don't come with a "thus says the LORD" preamble. And so we mostly don't recognize that God is warning us to not do something.

We need to train ourselves to evaluate every warning or caution we receive on its own merits, irrespective of whether the warning came from "Abigail" or from "Joab", irrespective of whether it came from someone we like or from someone we don't really like. It is the message that is important, not the messenger. God may use converted people to warn us, or God may use people who are totally carnal to warn us. And we need to see and to recognize that God is the One who sends warnings to us when we are tempted to do something foolish. In essence God does for all of His people today exactly the same that God will do for all people during the millennium.

And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, **This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left.** (Isaiah 30:21)

The method God uses today may be different from the way such warnings will be given during the millennium. But **the principle** underlying those millennial warnings certainly **applies** to every single one of God's people **today**, even as it has applied in every other age. God will surely see to it when any of us are tempted to "turn to the right hand or to the left" that **we will receive some kind of warning** of highly undesirable consequences for such turning to the right or to the left.

And let's be sure that we never lose sight of God's intentions in providing warnings of serious consequences for wrong actions. Where human laws are aimed exclusively at regulating our outward actions, the laws of God and the warnings that God provides are aimed first and foremost at providing us with an incentive to change our inner thoughts and our motivations, and then as a consequence of that change in attitude we also seek to avoid wrong conduct and wrong actions.

God is interested in the heart being changed, so that the right actions are then an expression of that changed heart.

Frank W Nelte