

Followers of the Way

Obedience – the call to holiness

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Ezekiel 10:1-19; 11:1-12

At our creation, God called us to obedience. In Genesis 2:16, God tells Adam, 'You may freely eat of every tree in the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day that you eat of it you shall die.' And, of course, that's precisely what Adam and Eve do, they eat from the tree, with the exact result God predicted – not physically, of course, but spiritually. Disobedience caused a seismic dislocation in their beings, which irrevocably separated them from God, and has placed all of us ever since in slavery to sin.

And by ourselves there's no way back, because from that point on our freedom of choice was irrevocably compromised. Which means, in practice, that even the choices that we think are good and noble, and will bring happiness – if they're not consciously first submitted to God, they're tainted. The bottom line is, without some kind of external, divine intervention, there's nothing we can do to restore the relationship Adam and Eve enjoyed with God before they gave way to temptation, which means now – by ourselves – we can never become fully what God has made and intends us to be.

It's interesting, by the way, that before the Fall Adam and Eve were at no point forbidden to eat from the tree of life. Indeed, the implication would seem to be that God intended that at some point they should eat from it, so that they'd live forever, and it's only to stop them doing this that they're expelled from Eden – because God knows that if they do, having eaten from the tree of knowledge, the whole of humanity will be eternally doomed (Genesis 3:22 'And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.'). And we know that it's at this point that God devised the plan to win us back, which could only be implemented by His own Son taking on human form and going head to head with Satan.

It's important to be clear at the outset that we're created as spiritual beings in a human body, to live in direct relationship with God. To put it another way, we are created to live in obedience, *as servants and agents of God*, wielding His power. God wants us to live in this relationship, and it's this that Satan wanted to stop, and even destroy – and today he's still terrified of our becoming fully what God intends us to be. But this is what happened when Christ died on the Cross. Jesus took the weight of our sin on Himself, and in return gave us His righteousness, which restored us to the direct relationship with God for which we'd been made. In a nutshell, Jesus restored the status quo ante bellum ... the situation that existed before the war.

But our difficulty is that, so far, only part 1 of the plan has been implemented. We've been saved, but the world is still awaiting its full redemption, which will happen when Christ returns in glory and finally and forever smashes Satan's hold. Which means that

for the moment the battle is still raging, and our task remains to seek after the lost and tell them the good news that Christ has set them free – because once Jesus does return, that's it and it will be too late. Satan, a rebellious angel, will be consigned to the lake of fire, along with all his minions.

However, the trouble is that, even though we know in our heads we're saved, most of us don't fully realise what Christ has done, and the power that has been given to us.

Okay, let's backtrack a little and look more closely at obedience. We know that, while God was getting everything in place to win us back, He was working hard behind the scenes, and was still very much 'present' on earth. As a crucial part of His plan, He singled out the Jewish nation (which at the time, by the way, was a rabble) to become His chosen agent for redemption – and then He set about preparing them, revealing Himself to them, bit by bit, and giving them rules to live by. Teaching them what it meant to be obedient, and why it was so important.

Time and again, as we know from the Bible, the Jews got it wrong – and time and again they were punished. Not because God was 'nasty', but because this was the only way this obtuse, pig-headed people could learn and understand the reality of the spiritual battle raging over the earth, and that there could be no compromise with evil. God gave to the Jews (who must so often have wished they weren't quite so 'chosen'), the land of Israel as their eternal possession and, once the Temple had been built at His command, and consecrated, He took up residence in the Holy of Holies. We read in 2 Chronicles 7:1-16 '...The Glory of the LORD filled the Temple. The priests could not enter the LORD's Temple because the Glory of the LORD filled it.' So the Holy of Holies became the seat of His invisible presence on earth.

But our reading this morning, from Ezekiel, describes the departure or withdrawal of that presence, and the reason given is clear. The Jews have sinned. They have gone after other gods, even going so far as to build shrines to them *in God's own House* and incorporating the cultic sexual practices of these other religions into their worship. This is unspeakable abomination, and it's polluted the temple and the land to such an extent that God will no longer remain.

When Ezekiel described this vision, it must have been incredibly shocking and terrifying to those who heard. Yahweh, the God of gods and Sovereign over all – their protector – was abandoning them and giving them up to their fate! Something He had promised never to do ... or so they thought.

They were learning the hard way the cost of unfaithfulness. And it's worth pointing out, I think, that, though God later restored the people to the land and the Temple was rebuilt (again at His command), His presence didn't return, and wouldn't, until the birth of His Son.

This is how serious 'sin' is. God will never compromise with evil, because it's the polar opposite of Himself. It's the darkness to His light, and it leads only to death. This is why there can never be any accommodation or so-called balancing of interests. A little bit of evil isn't okay!

In Christ, however, God's plan to win us back was implemented, and the devil's hold was broken. The trouble is, most of us still have no idea what that really means. In Christ, we're set free from sin. As Paul said, that means we've now come under a new law – or the old law, if you like ... God's law, that reflects and is correlated to the way we're created. But that's only the start.

Obedience and purity – holiness – connect us with God, so that we come under His direction and His power can flow through us without obstruction. Let's be absolutely clear, God actively **wants** us to have and to use the gifts of the Spirit. He wants the sick to be healed, the oppressed set free, and the dead raised to new life, but for the full release of His power for that to happen, we have to be submitted and obedient - otherwise the exercise of such gifts might become witchcraft ... us trying to wield power.

The simple fact is, if we want to move in God's power, we have to be aligned to His will, which means we have to be obedient. Not perfect, of course, because in this life we all continue to make mistakes and 'sin'. But we have to do our best to obey God's commands. And it's then that we see the real outpouring of His power – which utterly terrifies the devil, and that he'll do all he can to stop. Obedience is the key, and the devil will do all he can to undermine that.

But let's forget ourselves for a moment, and go back to why the world is currently such a mess. After all, Christ has broken Satan's stranglehold, hasn't He, so why aren't things getting better? Well, the big thing about God is that He gives us freedom of choice, and, like the people of Israel in the times immediately preceding the exile, men and women have rejected Him and given their worship instead to lesser 'gods'; like climate change, for instance, LGBT rights, abortion.... Across the globe, men and women have said, we don't need God any more, thank you, we can work things out better for ourselves! We're going to put 'faith' in our own *powers* and do whatever we want!

And look what's happened! Every year we abort around 73 million babies, their only offence being that they aren't wanted, or 'it's not the right time'. We insist that marriage between one man and one woman is redundant, because all that matters is 'love'. And we protest against paedophilia and sexual exploitation, yet at the same time say that everyone has an absolute right to have sex whenever and wherever they want, with whomever they want, because the old rules just don't apply.

Headline news, to God the rules do apply, because they're an outworking of the way we've been made, and to live in any other way causes harm. To disobey is actually giving worship to Satan. We might think that having whatever we want is going to make us happy, so it's got to be good, but, in reality, we're destroying ourselves – just like back in Eden. Over the last century we have increasingly given our worship to the profane, and the result has been that we've fed evil, allowing its tentacles to spread through every level and condition of humanity, and to grow so strong that God has at last said, Enough! He has withdrawn His presence and we are reaping the whirlwind of our unholy choices. When He returns now, it will be in judgment.

But those of us who know God are His agents, still tasked, while we remain in this world, with seeking after the lost, and what He most wants of us now is that we become

unblocked channels, so that He can work through us. Which means that He is calling us, as individuals, to obedience ... to holiness. To reject 'compromise'. This is what Satan most fears, because it's when we obey and Self is cast out, so that we become increasingly conformed to the image of Christ – it's then that God can really work through us in power.