

Crisis at Kadesh

Elizabeth Edwards, former wife of presidential candidate, John Edwards, before her death from cancer as she thought back on her husband's infidelities, said: I am imperfect in a million ways, but I always thought I was the kind of woman, the kind of wife to whom a husband would be faithful. I had asked for fidelity, begged for it, really, when we married. I never need flowers or jewelry, [I said] I don't care about vacations or a nice car. But I need you to be faithful. Leave me, if you must, but be faithful to me if you are with me. ⁱ

Bob Dylan wrote these lyrics in 1969:

*I once held her in my arms
She said she would always stay
But I was cruel, I treated her like a fool
I threw it all away
Once I had mountains in the palm of my hand
And rivers that ran through ev'ry day
I must have been mad, I never knew what I had
Until I threw it all away.* ⁱⁱ

Have you ever done anything like that? You had something so incredibly good, or you had a golden opportunity dropped in your lap, but you turned it down, you threw it all away. Why do we do things like that?

The nation of Israel was rescued by God from slavery in Egypt. God brought them out into the desert where he carefully instructed them in a perfect plan for how to live by obedience to Him and experience His mercy and grace. Now, He has guided them to the border of a land that is "flowing with milk and honey." A land He wants to give to them as their forever home. As with all gifts from God, all they need do is accept it by faith. That's it! They just need to say, "Yes, Lord! We accept this gift and whatever obstacles may be before us, we know by faith that You will enable us to conquer them!"

But somehow, they couldn't bring themselves to say that. How is this possible? While this might seem like a somewhat depressing story to study, it's a story of tremendous importance. And in the end, it's not depressing, for even here in Kadesh we will see the amazing grace of God. First, we must unveil...

I. The Diabolical Deception of Sin.

What is sin? In the Bible there are at least five Hebrew words commonly used for sin and in the Greek at least seven. But behind all these different words is a single concept. We often think that selfishness is the base concept of sin but that's not really true. The New Bible Dictionary says:

The most characteristic feature of sin in all of its aspects is that it is directed against God. David said, "*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight...*" (Ps. 51:4) ...The common notion that sin is selfishness

betrays a false assessment of its nature and gravity. From the outset and throughout its development sin is directed against God...ⁱⁱⁱ

So, a more accurate core definition of sin would be that, "Sin is rebellion against God; His standards, His creation and His will." And while we are more than capable of rebelling on our own, to make matters worse, there is an enemy army of spiritual beings in this world, who themselves have rebelled against God, and they are working hard to tempt us to go deeper and deeper in our rebellion to thwart the good purposes of God.

This conflict is exactly what we see here in Numbers 13 and 14. God had announced His good intentions for Israel back in Genesis when He said to Abraham:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. (Gen. 12:2, 3)

So, why would anyone rebel against God's wanting to bless them? There's only one reason: because they were deceived. God warned us, Jesus warned us, the apostles and the church mothers and fathers have all warned us that Satan and his demons are the best liars anywhere. Jesus said:

He (Satan) was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:44)

Satan and his demons are bold deceivers. They can literally make bad seem good, make sin look like obedience, which is exactly what happened with ten of the Israelites who went in to spy out the Land of Promise. When they reported back:

They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw the descendants of Anak there... We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are... We saw the Nephilim there... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them." (Num. 13:27, 28, 31, 33)

Now, you might say, "Hey, they're just giving an accurate report of the situation! Why is this sin?"

It's sin because God had already promised to give them victory over all those people before they left Mt. Sinai! He said:

See, I have given you this land. Go in and take possession of the land that the LORD swore he would give your fathers - to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - and to their descendants after them. (Deut. 1:8)

By giving this report, ten of the twelve spies were rebelling against God by doubting His promise. They believed their eyes rather than the Word of God. And as Num. 14:22 says, since leaving Egypt, the people had shown this lack of faith ten times. God had given them many chances to prove their faithfulness. They failed to do so.

Have you ever been tempted to do that? You know what God's Word says but what you see or what you feel is so different. Satan's greatest temptation isn't to tell us, "Yeah, that's wrong but who cares?" No, Satan's greatest temptation is to say, "How could this be wrong when it feels so right? God's Word must not apply to this." Have you ever been deceived by that lie? You're not alone. We all have.

This brings us to the second lesson at Kadesh, which is...

II. The Result of Sin Is Always Brokenness.

Whenever you sin, something breaks... always. Really? Always? Yes, always. I John 3:4 says:

Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness.

But the deceptiveness of sin is such that we can't always see what broke so many Christians who think that not ALL sin results in brokenness, just the really bad sin. I remember one time I dropped a soup bowl at home. But it didn't shatter so I thought, "Whew! That was close! It didn't break." So, I poured some soup in it and sat down at the table. Before too long a puddle was forming on the table beneath my bowl. I couldn't see it, but the bowl was cracked. It was useless for eating soup.

This verse makes it crystal clear that everyone who sins breaks something – at the very least, we break God's law. But that almost always means something else gets broken too, like a promise or a heart or the purpose for which we were made.

Does this mean that every sin has the same consequence? No, different sins are more serious than others and so, they have more serious consequences. Gossiping about someone breaks a relationship but it can be repaired in this life. Murdering someone cannot be repaired in this life. But, all sin breaks something. Time, by itself, will NOT heal that break. No matter how long I would wait, that bowl I dropped will still leak UNLESS I do something to fix it. If you have never asked God to forgive your sin, you have a broken relationship with Him. No matter how many good things you do, it will not fix what you broke! I could not break 1,000 bowls over the rest of my life but it won't fix the one I broke. See, here's the truth about your tiniest sin – it's not so tiny. One sin will break your relationship with God UNLESS you're His child. If you're a child of God, there will be consequences to your sin but you won't be kicked out of the family. That's what we see here in Numbers.

The Israelite's sin is not a small sin, it's a whopper! They refuse to live by faith in His Word and instead they live by fear of what they think they see. Joshua and Caleb try to persuade them otherwise. They said to them:

The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us, Do not be afraid of them.

But the whole assembly talked about stoning them. (Num. 14:7-10a)

Because of this sin, a lot was broken that day. People's trust in God was broken. Trust in Moses and Aaron was broken. Unity among the tribes was broken. Peace was broken. I imagine relationships among the generations was broken. A lot was broken that day but Israel was NOT kicked out of the family of God. God did NOT disown Israel that day. Satan won a victory that day but he did not cause God to tear up His covenant with Israel to bless the world through them. When you become a child of God, you are His forever!

This leads us to a final word of hope...

III. Though Sin Breaks, Grace Redeems.

Have you ever heard anyone say that the meaning of “justification” is “just as if you’ve never sinned”? That’s not exactly true. You see, sin always breaks something and even if the break can be mended, it’s not really as if it never was broken. If I glued my broken soup bowl back together, it would work again as a bowl, but you’d always see the crack, just like when you see Jesus, you will see the scars in His hands and feet. He’s resurrected but it’s not as if He were never crucified. We’ll see His scars caused by our sin when we meet Him.

A better word for the situation of the Israelites after their crisis at Kadesh is simply “grace.” The Hebrew word for grace that is relevant here is *Hed*. This is the action of a superior to an inferior. It speaks of “undeserved favor.” By definition, this is not anything we can do for God. It is only something He can do for us.

The Israelites did not deserve to receive any level of mercy. They had demonstrated non-faith ten times! In fact, God made this offer to Moses:

I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they. (Num. 14:12)

God would have been perfectly justified in doing that. Their sin was THAT serious. But Moses intercedes for the people and asks God to forgive their sin, which He does. But the people have aligned themselves with Satan and that means that even though their sin is forgiven, there will still be consequences, BIG consequences:

The LORD replied, “I have forgiven them as you asked. Nevertheless... 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. (Num. 14:20-21, 23)

So, sin has broken the people’s trust in God but it has also broken God’s trust in this generation of His people. He cannot send them into the land as His army when He can’t be sure they will follow orders. So, the whole nation is sent to live in the wilderness for 40 years, one year for each day of their contemptuous spying. Their sin is forgiven, but sometimes the consequences of sin cannot be removed.

Chuck Colson experienced this. Colson committed a sin that was also a federal crime while he was the Special Counsel to President Nixon. This scarred him for life. He was disbarred, shamed and potentially linked forever with one of the darkest moments in U.S. history. But on his way to prison, he became a follower of Jesus Christ. This did not remove the consequences of his sin, but it did redeem his life and eventually his reputation. How? Listen to his own explanation:

The great paradox [of my life] is that every time I walk into a prison [Colson founded the ministry “Prison Fellowship”] and see the faces of men and women who have been transformed by the power of the living God, I realize that the thing God has chosen to use in my life... is none of the successes, achievements, degrees, awards, honors, or cases I won before the Supreme Court. That’s not what God’s using in my life. What God is using in my life to touch the lives of literally thousands of other people is the fact that I was a convict and went to prison. That was my great defeat, the only thing in my life I didn’t succeed in. ^{iv}

Psalms 78 is a re-telling of the story of Israel’s failure at Kadesh Barnea and their subsequent sentencing to the wilderness because of their sin. The Psalmist writes:

**But they continued to sin against him,
rebellious in the desert against the Most High.
They willfully put God to the test...
Yet he was merciful;
he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them.
Time after time he restrained his anger
and did not stir up his full wrath.
He remembered that they were but flesh,
a passing breeze that does not return. (Ps. 78:17, 18a, 38, 39)**

The singing group, Point of Grace, has a song that says:

*I used to pray that you would take this shame away
Hide all the evidence of who I've been
But it's the memory of the place You brought me from
That keeps me on my knees
And even though I'm free -
Heal the wound but leave the scar
A reminder of how merciful you are
I am broken, torn apart
Take the pieces of this heart
And heal the wound but leave the scar^v*

What's the crisis of sin that has scarred your life? God has not given up on you or turned His back on you. If you will humbly ask for and submit to His Spirit, He will redeem even your time in the wilderness to make it meaningful, not a waste, and something that brings Him glory. Look for God! You're not alone. He's in the desert with you! Let's pray...

ⁱ Elizabeth Edwards as quoted by David Jeremiah in his book *God Loves You* (Brentwood, FaithWords, 2012), p. 94

ⁱⁱ Bob Dylan, Copyright 1969 by Big Sky Music

ⁱⁱⁱ *The New Bible Dictionary*, J. D. Douglas, editor (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), p. 1189

^{iv} Chuck Colson sermon, "The Gravy Train Gospel," PreachingToday.com

^v Point of Grace, "Heal the Wound," Warner/Chappell Music, Inc.