

Getting Back on Spiritual Track #5: Responding to God

Last week I spoke about the importance of listening to God. Hearing from God demands a response. God likes it when we respond to him. We were created by him in such a way as to be able to connect with him. We can connect with God in a number of different ways. Praise, worship, thanksgiving, confession, repentance and of course through his word.

As we continue our series through the Old Testament books of I and II Kings, we come to the issues of responding to God. Not just responding in general, but responding to him in the most critical area of all – when we get off track due to our sin. I want to return to one of the most intriguing figures in the books of I and II Kings - a man by the name of Josiah.

King after king who went before Josiah had lost their way. They had drifted far from God and that's putting it mildly. The spiritual and moral condition was horrible. They were worshipping false gods and idols, giving themselves over to any and every sexual excess, dabbling in the occult – you name it, they were doing it. Josiah seemed to have a sense that things were way off course, because the first thing he did when he became king was to work to restore the temple.

It had fallen into shambles, and was badly in need of repair. While they were remodelling it, they found something that had been lost. The Torah, the first five books of the Bible, God's laws, God's word, to the people of Israel. We don't know how it got lost, but somehow, somehow, it had been ignored, overlooked, put away. Which tells us something about how far off track they had gotten spiritually. God's Word was so neglected; they had actually lost it! Then it was found and it was sent to the king. Josiah sat down and read it straight through. By the time he was through, he was a wreck. What he read told him just how far off course he was. How far from God they were. How far he was, too. So, what did he do? What was his response?

¹⁰ Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, "Hilkiah the priest has given me a book." And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king. ¹¹ When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes. ¹² He gave these orders to Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Akbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary and Asaiah the king's attendant: ¹³ "Go and inquire of the LORD for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the LORD's anger that burns against us because those who have gone before us have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us." 2 Kings 22: 10-13.

King Josiah tore his clothes, which for that day and time was the strongest possible reaction you could have to reading something, learning something, hearing something, that struck you to the core of your being. It got to him at a visceral level. It affected him deep down in his gut and his soul. Take a look at what happened next:

¹Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. ²He went up to the temple of the LORD with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets—all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the LORD. ³The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the LORD—to follow the LORD and keep his commands, statutes and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant. 2 Kings 23: 1-3.

²⁵ Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses. 2 Kings 23: 25.

We live in a punitive world. Do something wrong and you will be punished. We take that mindset into our relationship with God. Thinking that if we respond to God and confess our sin and our wrong doings that he will punish us. God doesn't act like that towards us. He is always waiting to forgive. However, it's hard. That voice plays in our heads, "you're going to be punished" or "God doesn't want to hear from you".

One of the problems with sin in our lives is that we can compare it to others. When we see ourselves as "pretty good" we misunderstand the gravity of sin and our desperate need for grace. I need God's grace daily and so do you. Thank goodness it is available 24/7. When we place ourselves above others, we become their judges. Then they will never measure up to what we think they should be.

If you are not careful, you may have gotten numb to your sin. You want to know something? When you sin and refuse to name it as sin, you harden your heart and it's very hard for God's grace to reach you. You take some spiritual paracetamol and hope that it deadens you to your sin. The problem is that paracetamol eventually wears off and you are left with the horrible feeling of letting God down. That's when the feeling of unworthiness begins to take hold of your life.

The more you refuse to realise what you're doing, the more calloused and deadened you become to the sin in your life. Which makes it harder and harder to make your way to Christ. I have found this helpful in my own life over the years. It's something I've built into my prayer life. I ask him to reveal my sin to me, to burden me, to prompt me about it. This helps me realise what is really going on in my life. Without this I would just return to taking spiritual paracetamol to numb the pain.

So, first King Josiah realised his sin before God. Then there was real remorse. Josiah was so convicted that he tore his clothes. Remorse is not a word used very much anymore. Remorse is when you move beyond regret into sorrow. Not sorrow over what it's done to your life, but sorrow that you did a wrong thing in the eyes of God. It's having your heart break because you've broken the heart of God. It's the deep emotional understanding that you have driven a wedge between you and God. This separation is more than your heart can bear because you love him and nothing matters more than your relationship with him.

You can carry this feeling of remorse, this deep feeling for a long time. If left unattended, it can fester and grow into a spiritual sore and it will infect all of your life. It will spiral out of control and leave you in a place that you struggle to break free from. Remorse is important but you can't stay there for too long. You must move from remorse to repentance.

Repentance is the English translation of "metanoia," a rich word in the Greek language that carries the idea of heading in one direction, realizing that it is the wrong way, and then turning your life around toward the right direction. What repentance holds is a resolve to turn away from the sin.

When Josiah realized what he had been doing he regretted it deeply, as it took God's hand of blessing away from his life and the life of his people. When he had remorse over it and tore his robes; when he then repented, doing everything he could to get back on track. What did God do? He responded to Josiah's response. He met realization with understanding. He met regret with grace. He met remorse with forgiveness and he met repentance with restoration.

We can carry sin around with us for a long time. It gets heavier and heavier as time goes by. We don't have to carry it. Jesus said this, Matthew 11:28, **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.** Realising sin in our lives, feeling truly sorry for our sin and repenting of it before God is incredibly freeing.

¹⁹Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, Acts 3: 19.

⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:19.

Real spirituality is not about sinlessness, it's not about perfection; it's about how you deal with your sin. The key to dealing with your sin is realising your sin, feeling remorse over it and then repenting of it, turning from it. When you do, God meets that response with one of his own – forgiveness. Don't miss that.

When you respond to God, He responds to you. When you learn what to say – and mean it – then God says what you most long to hear to you. Do we have the greatest God, or what? Isn't this our heart's desire? To be able to own how we've been living, regret it, feel bad about it, and want to change it and have God there, every step of the way, saying, "you are forgiven".

For Josiah, reinstating the covenant relationship with God did not save Israel from their ultimate fate before God but it did save the King from seeing it.

¹⁵She said to them, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Tell the man who sent you to me, ¹⁶'This is what the Lord says: I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people, according to everything written in the book the king of Judah has read. ¹⁷Because they have forsaken me and burned incense to other gods and aroused my anger by all the idols their hands have made, my anger will burn against this place and will not be quenched.' ¹⁸Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the Lord, 'This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: ¹⁹Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I have spoken against this place

and its people—that they would become a curse and be laid waste—and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I also have heard you, declares the Lord. ²⁰Therefore I will gather you to your ancestors, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place.” 2 Kings 22:11-20.

Further, Josiah is the King who comes closest to fulfilling the requirements of the book of Law, the Torah. He is the King who tunes to God with all his heart, soul and strength. The covenant requires repentance and obedience. Unfortunately for Israel and Judah it reads like a story of too little too late. Josiah's spiritual strength and commitment will not be enough to save the nation from destruction. Exile is looming.

Fortunately, God does not give up and his trustworthiness' is the assurance that the covenantal relationship will continue for those who trust in God. As a servant of the new covenant, Jesus Christ is humiliated by the taunts of soldiers in an agonising crucifixion. Jesus identifies with the worst of human suffering. He voluntarily chooses the way of human suffering in order to gain victory over it.

The crucifixion of Jesus is not just another man dying on a cross. His voluntary choice of suffering qualifies him to be the Messiah, the one who fulfils the hope of the new covenant. Christians believe that on the cross things change. That the cross does not just show us things; it did something once and for all.

Christianity provides hope. The voluntary suffering of Christ demonstrates that commitment to the covenant in the fateful days of Josiah was justified. No other faith offers hope the same way. God's loyalty to his covenant in the days of Josiah and Jesus reminds us that God can both respond and has responded to evil. The story of Josiah is to help believers grasp faith and hope in a different era. God our redeemer is and will be sufficient. As if I need to remind you, **⁸Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and for ever. Hebrews 13:8.**

So, how will you choose to respond to God in your life? If you are prepared to take time to listen really listen, then what of it? How will you respond when your spiritual road map is only partially known and you are asked to trust God for the rest of the map. He is waiting for you to respond to him.