

VaYelech

And He Went

L-RD's Table

Torah:

Deuteronomy 31-130

Haftarah:

Hosea 14:2-10; Micah 7:18-20; Joel 2:15-27

Brit Chadashah:

Romans 10:1-17

Reading: Hannah 00. 33,35 and Ps. 65. Jewish Hero: Mary Magdalene. Carrier: David

This is the third last Torah portion in Deuteronomy and Moses is preparing for the transition to Joshua's leadership. Moses says that at 120, he is no longer able to go out and come in which is a way of saying that his strength is finally beginning to fade. He knows that he is reaching the end of his life and wants to leave a solid enough legacy that the people will know how to walk with the L-rd, both during the conquest of Canaan and afterwards as they settle into the land.

Later the land is described as one which flows with milk and honey, which should not be taken literally. It is a bountiful land and the House of Israel will have no more trouble taking possession of it, than they did taking possession of the lands of Sihon and Og. Moses gives the people a sevenfold exhortation to be courageous (31:6) and then he calls for Joshua and, before the leaders and the people, formally appoints him as his successor.

Next Moses writes down the Law that he has taught them on the plains of Moab and entrusts the scroll into the hands of the Levites who carry the ark. He then commands all the elders of Israel to read it before the people every seven years at Sukkoth, during the sabbatical year. This is so the people and their children will learn to fear the L-rd and to put into practice all the words of this Law.

There is already a copy of the commandments which were given while they camped around Mount Sinai. There were also manuscripts of the other portions of what became the Torah we have today, but the people were to give their primary attention to the scroll which Moses gave to the priests. It was only when our people were in Babylon that all the surviving scrolls were put together to give us the Torah, the prophets and the writings.

There are some 400 missing books mentioned in the Old Testament and if any of them were found, they would not contradict or undermine what the L-RD committed into the hands of His people, so that they would know how to walk with Him.

What follows is a surprising prophetic announcement of the people's future apostasy, because it will take several generations, or longer to root out criminal idolatry and fornication from among the people. Moses is instructed to compose a song that the L-rd wants the people to learn. He writes it down and is going to teach it to the people, both as a testimony to the faithful provision of G-d when His people walk with Him and a dire warning of the consequences of walking away from Him.

The L-RD warns Moses about the people's coming apostasy and along with entrusting the priests with a scroll of the Law which he taught them on the plains of Moab, he assembles all the leaders and elders of the people and prepares to recite the song the L-RD has commanded him to compose.

The people are told that the L-rd knows that they will fall away from Him, once they enter into the land, but at least four times in this portion, they are told that the L-rd Himself will be with them as they conquer their enemies and take possession of the land. You see we always have a choice, even as we receive the mighty blessings of the L-rd. He never takes away our free will and expects us to voluntarily obey Him and put into practice all the words of the Law.

His Word contains provisions both for our blessing and for our chastisement. This does not mean that everyone will abandon the L-RD, nor does it mean that everyone will always walk with the L-rd. There will always be two core groups of people in Israel and the same is true today, even in the body of our blessed Messiah. The first group is the righteous core who will keep the Word and teach the people to follow suit and abandon their false gods and their carnal, sinful ways. When the people listen to this core, they will prosper and the blessing of the L-rd will overshadow them.

The other group is the unrighteous core who will do their best to undermine the people's walk with L-rd and lead them back into the darkness of sin. When this group has the people's attention and allegiance, then the chastisement of the L-rd will fall upon them. They will either return to place of obedience from which they have fallen, or they will be hounded to the ends of the earth until they come to their senses.

Whenever the righteous core of any people dissolves and vanishes, like it did among the Canaanites and in the days of Noah, then the chastisement of the L-rd turns into a kind of police action to destroy the rebels and remove them from under the sun. This is the true battle which is being fought, both in the heavenlies and among us on the earth. Your primary spiritual allegiance is very important to the L-rd and while the righteous core of our world is not yet headed for extinction and dissolution, it is under attack, from both the outside and from the inside.

The Haftarah portion speaks of the return and restoration of the captives of Israel and promises that they will never have to be displaced again. This will always be based on the assumption that they will continue to seek the L-rd and obey the voice of His Word. They were told that they had come home to stay and would experience the abundance which was promised to their forefathers.

The second dispersion was not a captivity like the first. After the second temple was destroyed, our people were scattered among the nations and generations of mankind and Jerusalem was to be trodden underfoot of the nations until the time of the nations draws to a close. It is beginning to happen in our days and in the New Testament portion, Paul speaks of our outreach mandate to unbelieving Israel until they come to their senses and embrace the true righteousness of the Law which is found by putting our faith in what the Messiah accomplished for all of us.

It should be both an intense and a joyful outreach because the Messiah is the true expression of the Law and it is what our people have always been called to embrace from the very beginning. Thankfully we are seeing myriads of our people coming to faith in the Messiah and even those who are holding out, sense that the days of the Messiah are getting very close and many strange and wonderful things are happening in our world all around us. May we always be found among the righteous core, upholding His Word and teaching it, because this will always be our singular calling and our spiritual duty.

Sermon: Shabbat Shuvah and the Reality of Repentance

Passages: No, there not a righteous man upon the earth who does good and does not sin. Only this is what I have found, G-d has made men upright, but they have sought many detours. Sin is crouching at your door and its desires are towards you, but you must master it. (Eccl. 7:20; 7:29 and Genesis 4:7)

This morning as we examine the reality of repentance, I want to help you distinguish between two spiritual extremes: cheap grace and carnal legalism. Neither of these extremes represent what the Bible talks about when authentic repentance is being discussed. On the one hand you have the mighty grace of G-d which washes you clean as snow and delivers you from the clutches of sin and on the other, there is the need we have for complete obedience, if we are to inherit the blessings of eternal life.

James says that faith without works is dead, but Paul says that it is by grace we are saved through faith, and it is not by works. Now we could split into two camps and play different verses of the Bible against each other and tweak passages which appear to disagree with our position, to make them say what we want them to and not what they actually say.

There are some who say that once you obtain salvation, it is impossible to lose it. They also say that those who backslide away from grace were never saved in the first place – they were never part of G-d's elect, who were predestined to be saved from before the foundation of the world. They go on to say, in extreme cases, that at birth we were born either as a sheep or as a goat and there is nothing we can do to change this reality. All sheep are destined for salvation and all goats are destined for the eternal lake of fire.

On this Shabbat Shuvah, as we examine the reality of repentance, I want to draw a balance between these two extremes and build a picture of what the Bible actually teaches. This is because it is both true that once you come to faith, you receive everlasting life and that it is possible to lose this eternal life and to return to the darkness we were delivered from.

The two extremes are named for their founders: Calvinism (after the teachings of the Frenchman, John Calvin) and Arminianism (after the teachings of the Dutchman, Jacobus Arminius). In Judaism both the inexhaustible grace of G-d is taught along with the judgment which falls upon the wicked who forsake His Word. We always get the best of both worlds.

Where does the balance lie? You need to listen to me carefully, so that the repentance you exercise will draw you back, closer to the L-rd and not leave you in constant fear for your immortal soul. Are you convinced that the L-RD loves you and wants you to walk with Him?

While we live in a sin infected world, sin does not have a long lifespan or shelf life. It is only visited on the children to the third or fourth generation, while the goodness and mercy of G-d is extended to a thousand generations of those who love Him and walk according to His Word. Three or four generations means that sin only exists in the living generations of mankind and no one can fall victim to a generational curse from their deceased ancestors. In a very real sense, we are not sinners by birth, we are sinners by choice. We are born in innocence and are either drawn to the light, by our innocence or wander away from it into the darkness of sin and death as we defile it and destroy it. What are you wandering towards?

Some teach we are sinners by birth and and possess a fallen nature and that, on our own, we can do no good thing, no matter how hard we try to be good and to do good. Paul does say that no good thing dwells in our flesh, but this is not because we were born this way, but because our bad choices have put us in this horrible condition.

In the Catholic church, people are taught that they possess Adam's sinful nature, which has to be washed away by infant baptism. The Bible says that we cannot come to faith unless we become like a small child. If small children possessed sinful natures by birth, why would the Lord require us to become like them? None of us bears either the guilt of Adam's sins, nor do we possess his sinful nature as if it came down to us genetically. We were born to choose.

The prophet Ezekiel says that fathers should not be put to death for the sins of their children and that children should not be put to death for the sins of their fathers. The righteousness of the righteous belongs to him alone and the wickedness of the wicked belongs to him alone. Sin is contagious, it is not genetic and we live in a world where the infection of sin is growing at a rapidly increasing pace because of all the bad choices people are making.

If we are sinners by choice and not sinners by nature, does that mean it would be possible for us to live sin free lives and earn the right to enter Heaven because of our merits? The Bible mentions three men who were sinless by nature (Enoch, Elijah and John the Baptist). There may be others who are not mentioned by name, just as there are prophets and priests of righteousness who are named, while others remain anonymous.

Some may wish to get to heaven on their own merits and while the Bible teaches that this is theoretically possible, so many of us catch the infection of sin and need the grace of God through our Messiah to deal with it and be set free from it. A greatly misunderstood theologian, Pelagius, taught that it was possible for mankind to walk with God and be righteous, because we are made in God's Image and possess a conscience which can guide us away from the dark and into the light. We are fallen by choice and not by nature.

He taught that we need to fully exercise our free will and live lives free from the entanglements of sin. Understood correctly, if it were not possible for us not to sin and if we were born sinners by nature, then it is not our fault, anymore than you can blame a lion for being a carnivore. But if we were born in innocence into a sin infected world, it becomes our mission and our duty to resist sin and not to let it become second nature to us. A sinful nature is acquired by our choices and is not some kind of strange birth right.

In our movement, we do not practice infant baptism because we do not believe that babies are born with the stain of sin, which some believe has been being passed on through the generations, ever since Adam and Eve sinned. We dedicate them to the Lord and welcome them as members of our community and once they reach an age where they want to make a public statement of their personal faith in the Messiah, we immerse them. We do not view baptism as a means of washing away any sin, but as a means of testifying publicly that we have embraced our faith in the Messiah and want to die to our old life. We belong to Him now.

While I do believe that the world is full to the brim with sinners, I do not believe it is because we were all born that way. We chose the darkness over the innocence we were born with and did not embrace the light which we were born to seek. Our Messiah came and died to take away the stain and the pain and the penalty of sin so we could freely seek Him and His Word.

Paul even made the extravagant claim that the Messiah came to save sinners, of whom he was the worst. If the truth be told, the portion of people who escape the stain of sin is effectively negligible and the true destiny of all the nations and generations of mankind will be decided the Messiah on the day of Judgment, when He examines the thoughts and motivations of all the hearts of all mankind. How strong a hold does sin have on you?

James is not preaching that we should try and earn our salvation through the practice of good works. What he is saying is that the absence of good works indicates that any faith that this person possesses is dead and void and not of the saving kind. He even says that the devils also believe and tremble – because their belief is not of the saving kind.

Could demons or even the devil repent and come to saving faith? This teaching has surfaced at various times over the centuries and teaches versions of a restoration when all brokenness and darkness will be healed as if it never existed- and everything will return to the state of innocence and light which existed before our first ancestors fell in the garden.

A French author even wrote a book outlining how Satan will one day repent of his evil and come to saving faith. There are two main problems with this supposition. First, once you obtain immortality your soul is no longer malleable and is incapable of change. This is why the enemy wanted our first ancestors to reach out and eat of the tree of life. Had they done so, they would have been in a lost state for all eternity. Instead we were gifted with mortality, and choice, so that we could both die and rise from the dead when the Messiah returns.

The second problem is why do we assume that the devil and his demons even want to repent and come to saving faith? They are so full of pride and hatred that there is no room for repentance and faith. I have known too many supposed believers who are in a similar state and are not even aware that they are spiritually dead and have wandered away from the L-rd.

You see, forgiveness is a prerequisite to being forgiven and those who have stopped forgiving have stopped being forgiven. There is no indication in the Bible that the evil one will one day stop being evil and come to faith. There is also no indication in the Bible that when all things are restored that everyone and everything that was ever impacted by evil, will be restored as if no evil ever befell them. Instead, all things will be made better than they ever were before!

All tears will be wiped away and we will be so comforted that it will be as if our tears also wiped away all sadness as we enter the Messiah's eternal kingdom. There will be no more pain over our losses and no more sadness because the old creation, with all of its darkness and brokenness, will have disappeared like a bad dream in the morning light.

Paul speaks of our carnal nature, which many have concluded is a sin nature, but it is really just the drives which we possess to satisfy our physical needs, without giving pause to see if they are right or wrong. It is our animal self, but no one I know would consider animals to be sinners because they do most things, even learning, by instinct. They can be made to become vicious, but they are not vicious by nature. The same is also true of us.

We are different because we have an inner nature which is made in the image of G-d and as we study the Bible, our moral sense becomes more finely attuned and we are more conscious of the desire to do right and avoid the practice of evil. We become spiritual by choice.

On Shabbat Shuvah, we examine our hearts and lives and consider how we can remove the power of sin and darkness from all and any areas of our lives. This is something we choose to do because our inner man has welcomed the Saviour into our hearts and lives and we are developing a strong, healthy allergy to sin and darkness. We become light dwellers.

We come to realize that the sin we have wallowed in, was caused by the sinful choices we made and because we suppressed both our innocence and the image of G-d we were born with. Our carnal nature has become polluted by sin and is full of evil desires and the lusts and the works of the flesh. But our physical body still remains the temple of the Holy Spirit and it is possible for us to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit, where once we were sold over to the works of the flesh. What are you cultivating in your heart and in your life?

We are not trying to earn our way to heaven, as much as we are trying to demonstrate our gratitude for having been forgiven and washed clean, as if we had never sinned. We want to exercise our faith as we deepen our walk with the Messiah and the best way to cause our faith to grow and deepen is through exercising obedience to what His Word teaches.

Faith and obedience and faith and works are not opposites which exist in competition with one another. They are in fact two sides of the same coin, because you cannot have the one without the other. We are sinners by choice and not by nature and we all possess a higher nature which is the image of G-d and the conscience He placed in all of us.

No single desire is in and of itself evil, but it becomes evil when we put satisfaction of the desire above our willingness to trust in the L-rd and obey His Word. Some people become slaves to their animal nature and live for the carnal satisfaction which stands opposed to the spiritual satisfaction we are called to seek. What kind of satisfaction are you seeking?

The Corinthian congregation had developed a version of cheap grace where they felt that because they had faith, they could do what they pleased with impunity. Other believers Paul had to contend with were filled with carnal legalism which was trying to earn G-d's favour and approval by an obedience which was self serving and not full of the true humility which we are all called to possess. How is your humility doing? What is your heart and life full of?

I have friends who are Calvinist. I have friends who are Arminian. While it is true that we are sinners by choice and can backslide away from our faith in the Messiah, it is also true that we possess the image of G-d which can hard wire us to practice faithful obedience. I have often said that you win or lose by the way you choose. On Shabbat Shuvah, what are you choosing? Do you feel that you are a sinner by nature and can do no good or do you realize that you are a sinner by choice and need to consciously choose to walk with the L-rd by His Word? Are you bringing forth works worthy of the salvation which you have received, so that like James, you can show me your faith by your works and no feel that faith exists with no need to demonstrate it by good works? Faith filled good works are the best kind.

We do not earn our place in heaven by our good works, we demonstrate our confidence in our Heavenly destiny by faithful obedience, rejoicing in what the Messiah did for us in setting us free from our sins. We want to walk in the light as He is in the light and be daily and constantly cleansed from the pain, the stain and the punishment of sin. Shabbat shalom and Shavua Tov. May you be filled to the brim with His forgiveness and with the righteousness which comes from walking according to His Word.