

Leadership And Covenants (Part One)

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The matter of leadership—whether nationally, locally, at home, on the job, or on the team—has always been a vexing problem for mankind. “Always” should be taken literally because Genesis 3:16-19 reveals it was a major part of several issues that triggered mankind’s circumstances ever since, down to this very second. After Adam and Eve’s sin, God imposed the following curses, at the same time pointedly stating why this major flaw in man’s character helped to trigger the human condition that persists today:

To the woman He said: “I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” Then to Adam He said, “Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it’: Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return.”

Notice that God mentions to Adam, whom He had appointed as leader of the family through which He intended to populate the entire earth, “you have heeded the voice [counsel] of your wife.” In other words, he had failed to lead the only person who was then under his authority. He took her counsel rather than do what God had commanded him to do, and thus he sinned. The context does not state why he did so, but what resulted was an act of idolatry. He put her counsel before God’s, breaking the first commandment.

How long did Adam ponder the challenge of the serpent’s arguments to break God’s commandment by eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil? A few seconds? A few minutes? Whatever it was, in comparison to the amount of time that has passed since, it remains as little more than a flash of lightning. Yet, consider how this seemingly minor sin motivated God to react.

Romans 8:18-23 vividly describes the long-term effects of God’s judgment given in the Garden:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. And not only they, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.

This singular episode in Eden illustrates how seriously God treats sin as compared to how lightly we tend to take it. It was a brief moment in time, when Adam, along with Eve—only two people—failed to exercise leadership by obeying God’s simple stricture. What they chose to do instead has brought

far more difficult lives on billions of people—difficulty that otherwise may have never occurred. Life, righteousness, and sin do not operate in a vacuum. There is no such thing as sin that does not hurt others, as some so foolishly think or proclaim to justify themselves.

Ecclesiastes 7:29 makes a telling statement regarding our creation: “Truly this only have I found: That God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.” Solomon intends that we understand Adam and Eve to be representative of all mankind. However, Genesis 3 makes clear that they exercised their leadership by leading us into sin. In so doing, they led us all to fall from the pinnacle of human innocence in which they had been created.

Poor Leadership Is the Pattern

There can be no doubt that God intended Adam and Eve to be leaders in guiding their children to live righteous lives. The Bible does not record how many children they produced in their roughly 900 years of living. They may have sincerely tried to raise righteous children, but Genesis reveals their success to have been at best a mixed bag. Their results begin on an ominous note, as their first child, Cain, grew up to be a murderer, killing his younger brother, Abel. Cain’s sin was different from Adam and Eve’s, but it was one Cain had the proclivity to do. He followed his parents’ lead in the practice they initiated.

As the Genesis story expands, we find that only two men, Enoch and Noah, achieved any recognizable leadership achievements by actually living righteous lives. Worldwide, leadership was so corrupt that the violent Nephilim are brought into the context as a contrast to righteous Noah, who followed God’s leadership.

Genesis 6:5 bluntly reports, “Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” God’s reaction appears in verses 6-7:

And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the Lord said, “I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.”

Another judgment followed, the Flood, as He carried out His threat.

A Few Positive Leadership Examples

Hebrews 11 provides us with names and examples of godly leadership during the times of the patriarchs and Israel’s subsequent history. These heroes of faith were involved in the events cited because their previous patterns of life had prepared them to be engaged in them and to glorify God as they did so.

Each leader’s record in Scripture, shows their histories to have been checkered, to say the least. None of them led perfectly. But this list in Hebrews 11 provides firm evidence that the quality of a person’s leadership is made consequential by the strength and consistent application of his faith in God and His Word.

By way of contrast, the overwhelming biblical evidence delivers a far different message about Israel's many kings and the average Israelite's attitude and conduct. Considering the scriptural guidance that the Israelites had available to them, as well as the history of preceding generations, they had no legitimate justification for their behavior. Instead, the Bible gives us a grievous, almost continuously repeating account.

Concerning Rehoboam, son of Solomon, II Chronicles 12:14 records, "And he did evil, because he did not prepare his heart to seek the Lord." How could he then please God with righteous leadership? Though he was a king, he was not prepared to do so. II Chronicles 14-21 reveals that Judah had relatively good leadership under Kings Asa and Jehoshaphat, but despite those good examples, along came King Jehoram, who refused to follow their examples. II Chronicles 21:4-6 observes his conduct and evaluates it:

Now when Jehoram was established over the kingdom of his father, he strengthened himself and killed all his brothers with the sword, and also others of the princes of Israel. Jehoram was thirty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned eight years in Jerusalem. And he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, just as the house of Ahab had done, for he had the daughter of Ahab as a wife; and he did evil in the sight of the Lord.

Notice whose leadership Jehoram followed and exercised in Judah.

We must consider briefly what God says regarding King Manasseh, son of one of Judah's better kings, Hezekiah:

Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. But he did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel. For he rebuilt the high places which Hezekiah his father had broken down; he raised up altars for the Baals, and made wooden images, and he worshiped all the host of heaven and served them. He also built altars in the house of the Lord, of which the Lord has said, "In Jerusalem shall My name be forever." And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord. Also he caused his sons to pass through the fire in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom; he practiced soothsaying, used witchcraft and sorcery, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger. He even set a carved image, the idol which he had made, in the house of God, of which God had said to David and to Solomon his son, "In this house and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put My name forever, and I will not again remove the foot of Israel from the land which I have appointed for your fathers—only if they are careful to do all that I have commanded them, according to the whole law and the statutes and the ordinances by the hand of Moses." So Manasseh seduced Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord had destroyed before the children of Israel. And the Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they would not listen. (II Chronicles 33:1-10)

It would be hard to name a king of Israel or Judah who led his nation into more evil. Yet, incredible as it is, God's Word reveals that Manasseh repented of much of it. His repentance was not a hollow one. He changed so completely that he did a complete turn-around, tearing down the idols he had

erected previously and making God's commanded sacrifices at the Temple. Nowhere is he directly evaluated as doing good in God's sight, but he did some good works to clean up some of the evil mess he had created. God's evaluation of him seems to be softened considerably, considering what could have been recorded.

Isaiah Reports as Judah Collapses

In both Isaiah and Ezekiel, God provides unambiguous summaries of the Israelites' leadership. In both books, unlike in Kings and Chronicles, God does not restrict His evaluation to the governing leadership but includes leaders from all parts of society. This is most clearly seen in Ezekiel, but we will look first at Isaiah's prophecy, partly because he wrote well over a hundred years before Ezekiel, showing that Judah steadfastly would not change.

Isaiah 1:4-9 begins to detail the low estate to which the nation had fallen due to poor leadership and the people's sinful compliance to their leaders.

Alas, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers, children who are corrupters! They have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked to anger the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away backwards. Why should you be stricken again? You will revolt more and more. The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faints. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores; they have not been closed or bound up, or soothed with ointment. Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire; strangers devour your land in your presence; and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers. So the daughter of Zion is left as a booth in a vineyard, as a hut in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city. Unless the Lord of hosts had left to us a very small remnant, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been made like Gomorrah.

Conditions were terrible in every aspect of life. By contrast, sin was flourishing. The rest of chapters 1 and 2 describe in more detail the existing circumstances. Also in chapter 2, God encourages them by describing what He is planning to do after the Day of the Lord, when leadership will be given to those who lead righteously.

In chapter 3, God returns to describing their then-present circumstances, specifically warning them through word-pictures that their leadership, as bad as it was, would worsen before it improved. Isaiah 3:1-7 describes this:

For behold, the Lord, the Lord of hosts, takes away from Jerusalem and from Judah the stock and the store, the whole supply of bread and the whole supply of water; the mighty man and the man of war, the judge and the prophet, and the diviner and the elder; the captain of fifty and the honorable man, the counselor and the skillful artisan, and the expert enchanter. I will give children to be their princes, and babes shall rule over them. The people will be oppressed, every one by another and every one by his neighbor; the child will be insolent toward the elder, and the base toward the honorable. When a man takes hold of his brother in the house of his father, saying, "You have clothing; you be our ruler, and let these ruins be under your hand." In that day he will protest, saying, "I cannot cure your ills, for in my house is neither food nor clothing; do not make me a ruler of the people."

This is a disturbing picture of the entire framework of leadership and governance being turned upside down, creating a fearsome, immoral chaos!

Then in Isaiah 3:12, God makes plain what has been a root cause in creating their multitudinous problems: “As for My people, children are their oppressors, and women rule over them. O My people! Those who lead you cause you to err, and destroy the way of your paths.”

Ezekiel Reports from Judah’s Captivity

Isaiah prophesied over a hundred years before Judah fell to Babylonian armies in 605 BC as a result of the people’s sins and their failure to heed Isaiah’s preaching and repent. Nebuchadnezzar then began deporting the Jews as slaves to Babylon in a series of three relocations. The first occurred immediately after the Babylonian victory, and in it went Daniel and his three friends.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel were both priests, but God, having other plans for Jeremiah, did not allow him to be deported. Ezekiel, however, was sent into captivity, probably among those carried away in 597 BC, the second deportation. He was installed in a prison camp on the River Chebar.

God began giving messages to Ezekiel a short time later. The first was the dazzling, wheel-within-a-wheel vision of divine glory that perhaps portrays God’s portable throne. From there, his message consists of three sections. The first section covers God’s judgment of Judah; the second relates God’s judgments regarding the Gentiles; and the third deals largely with the restoration of Israel following its destruction in the end time. Chapter 34, which we will consider regarding leadership, appears at the beginning of the third section.

Ezekiel 34:1-10 charges the leadership of Judah with these indictments:

And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God to the shepherds: “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and on every high hill; yes, My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth, and no one was seeking or searching for them.” Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: “As I live,” says the Lord God, “surely because My flock became a prey, and My flock became food for every beast of the field, because there was no shepherd, nor did My shepherds search for My flock, but the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock”—therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the Lord! Thus says the Lord God: “Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require My flock at their hand; I will cause them to cease feeding the sheep, and the shepherds shall feed themselves no more; for I will deliver My flock from their mouths, that they may no longer be food for them.”””

God is identifying that, over the course of Israel’s history, a chief cause of its despicable behavior and the resulting cultural deterioration was an almost continuous breakdown of leadership. He uses

the term “shepherd” to identify the source of the cause, but we need to consider it in more detail because a shepherd is generally associated with a person who leads sheep. We will see that the figurative use of “sheep” is the focus in this context.

Who Are the Shepherds?

Recall that in Isaiah 1 God described Judah as “a people laden with iniquity.” God personified the nation, describing its breakdown as a diseased body: “From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it” (Isaiah 1:6). The nation was corrupt and deceived from the lowliest citizen in the realm all the way to the highest, most powerful governmental leader.

It is easy to assume that in Ezekiel 34 “shepherd” refers only to Judah’s religious ministry. Jesus directly refers to Himself in John 10:11 in such a way: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.” However, minister is not the only occupation to which the Bible applies the term. A clear and perhaps surprising example appears in Isaiah 44:28, where God Himself calls Cyrus, a Gentile king, “My shepherd.” In II Samuel 5:2, David is commanded by God to “shepherd My people Israel, and be ruler over Israel.”

A final example is also revealing about the responsibilities of a shepherd. This episode in Numbers 27:15-19 took place just before God set Joshua apart to take Moses’ place as Israel’s leader prior to entering the Promised Land:

Then Moses spoke to the Lord, saying: “Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation, who may go out before them and go in before them, who may lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep which have no shepherd.” And the Lord said to Moses: “Take Joshua the son of Nun with you, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him, set him before Eleazar the priest and before all the congregation and inaugurate him in their sight.”

Shepherds of literal sheep were providers, guides, protectors, and their constant companions. Thus, they were figures of authority and leadership to the animals under their care. So close is the connection between shepherd and sheep that, to this day, separate flocks can mingle day or night at a well, and a shepherd has only to call his sheep, and they will separate themselves to gather to him. In Genesis 31:38-40, Jacob witnesses to the closeness of a shepherd to his flock, as does Jesus in John 10:5.

The Bible uses the term “shepherd” in Ezekiel 34 to designate anyone responsible for giving guidance to a community. In today’s language, in a national sense “shepherds” includes the president or prime minister or royalty, for that matter. It also includes representatives in the legislature and court justices all the way down to the local level. In addition, besides governmental functions, in principal it also includes leaders of corporations and in education, most especially in universities that exist to train the next generation of community leaders. We must not forget the leadership provided by entertainers and media figures. In other words, “shepherd” broadly includes anybody who should be providing righteous leadership over others.

The Most Important Human Leaders

Then comes what might be the most important shepherding category of all, because they are closest to us and have the most meaningful relationship with us—parents. A noteworthy example regarding

the impact of parental leadership is that of Adam and Eve. The Bible provides no specific instances of why things turned out as they did, but it is clear that Adam and Eve did not follow through on God's teaching as well as they could have. In the first generation after their sin, they played their roles in producing a murderer.

We have no firm idea as to when in Cain's and Abel's lives the murder took place. Were they in their twenties or thirties? Perhaps in their fifties? Considering how long people lived in that age, they may have been hundreds of years old. There are no absolute clues, but we can guess.

In the byplay that takes place after God banishes Cain to the east of Eden to be a vagabond and fugitive, Cain expresses his fear that others would find and kill him. God mercifully places a mark on him to identify him as one others should not harm. Where did those others come from? Clearly, they were also descendants of Adam and Eve, establishing that enough time had passed that communities of people were being founded. This means that Cain's and Abel's ages may have been considerably older than we may have assumed.

We find a distinct answer on Adam and Eve's shepherding of Cain when we combine two principles from Scripture. God says in Ezekiel 18:20: "The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." To this we add the apostle John's statement in I John 3:11-12: "For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous."

God's judgment in Genesis 4 does not lay the greatest weight of blame on Cain's first guides and leaders, Adam and Eve. John shows Cain to have been a disciple of Satan. Everyone who sins bears in himself the greatest burden of guilt. There is no doubt that people become enslaved to sinful thinking, but no one can excuse himself from a huge measure of blame.

Righteousness and sin are serious responsibilities; in the end there is no dodging the burden. Every human being has had less-than-perfect family, church, neighborhood, school, and work associations, having been given some measure of guidance through them. But God's Word is clear: God's judgment is fair, and each person is judged individually on the basis of his own record.

The importance of early, godly leadership from parents is highlighted by God's statement in Genesis 18:16-19 regarding His choice of Abraham as father of the faithful:

Then the men rose from there and looked toward Sodom, and Abraham went with them to send them on the way. And the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing, since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him."

What He says encompasses far more than early childhood training from parents, but it is included within its scope. It is vital that the "twig" be bent in the correct direction before the age of

accountability arrives so that the child is prepared to recognize and resist the pressures of life from Satan's system. Thus, Proverbs 22:6 admonishes us with sound counsel: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it."

The parental responsibility to provide correct guidance in leading their children is so important that God emphasizes it in Deuteronomy 6 immediately after Moses recounts the giving of the Ten Commandments and the formal ratification of what we know as the Old Covenant:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

Child training in the way of God is correct parental leadership. This passage establishes that God holds it to be a major responsibility not to be passed off to anyone else. To do this, the parents must practice the way of God to the best of their abilities in every aspect of life. In this way, the children are not only verbally taught God's way, but also witness it in action right in their own home. This is not happening in this nation, providing powerful evidence to all who believe God as to why it is crumbling from within. Godly leadership is produced within families practicing godly ways.

Most people are unaware that the word "leadership" does not appear even one time in *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. "Leader" appears only three times, and all forms of "lead" appear only 81 times. There is a good reason for this: The focus of God's persuasion to live His way of life is on *following* it. The terms "follow," "followed," "follows," "followers," and "following" combined appear 258 times—three times more than all forms of "lead" combined. We are frequently urged to follow Christ, the way of God, or the examples of the righteous. We are also urged to imitate the apostle Paul and Christ (I Corinthians 11:1), another form of following.

What is most important about leadership is that leaders are in reality followers. They follow either some person who has set a pattern that brought him success or some way of doing things to achieve success in some endeavor, whether in business, athletics, scholastics, or a way of life that brings growth—and perhaps brings God glory.

This is God's concern. Christianity is a way of life that God greatly desires us to follow. In Acts 16:17, it is called "the way of salvation"; in Acts 18:25, "the way of the Lord"; in Acts 19:9, it is simply called "the Way." Jesus was the greatest leader who ever lived, never sinning even one time, yet He declares in John 7:16, "My doctrine is not mine, but His who sent Me." Jesus led. He was in fact the very pinnacle of leadership because He followed the way of God perfectly.

God willing, more will follow on this aspect of leadership.