

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #121: REACTIONS TO GOD'S WORD

By John Temples

Paul declared in Romans 1:16 that the word of God, the gospel, is “the power of God to salvation.” How powerful is it? Isaiah addressed that in Isaiah 55:6-11:

“Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. ‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ says the Lord. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.’”

This passage is about the power of the Scriptures. Verses 6 and 7 speak of the power of God’s word to save and His willingness to save. Verses 8 and 9 speak of man’s inability to comprehend God’s thoughts apart from the written word. And verses 10 and 11 declare the efficacy of God’s word: It never returns to Him void (meaning powerless, empty, accomplishing nothing).

Sometimes we might doubt that last statement. Preachers deliver countless sermons, Christians pray and plead for lost loved ones; and yet there is seemingly no response. We are seeing in society today a growing indifference to the Bible and even hostility toward it. God’s message seems impotent and irrelevant in today’s world. But the power of God’s word has not diminished!

Read verses 10 and 11 again: “For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall

accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.” What do those verses mean?

Isaiah is declaring that having gone forth, God’s word will never return to Him without results--God had a purpose in sending it forth, and that purpose is always fulfilled. Paul expressed a similar thought in Romans 1:16, saying that the gospel “is the power of God unto salvation.” The word “power” in that text is the Greek word *dunamis*. We get the words *dynamo* and *dynamite* from that word.

We need to remember what Isaiah and Paul are saying: that whenever God’s word is read or taught, there will *always* be a response--it will have some kind of effect. Let us consider some effects the word of God has on people, some reactions people have to it.

CURIOSITY. Paul preached the gospel to the citizens of Athens (Acts 17). How did the Athenians react? “And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, ‘We will hear you again on this matter’” (Acts 17:32). The Bible addresses issues and subjects people are fascinated by but don’t fully understand: spirits, angels, heaven, hell, creation, judgment, the Godhead, etc. We must nurture and cultivate this curiosity when we find it. We need to imitate Jesus, who was a master at piquing people’s curiosity. Note how He got a Samaritan woman’s attention and turned an everyday conversation about water into a discussion of “living water” in John 4:5-15.

MOCKERY OR CONTEMPT (SAME PASSAGE). “Some mocked.” This is becoming an increasingly common reaction to Scripture. We must expect such and be prepared to defend the Bible against scoffers. To do this, we need to be experts in the Bible. Remember how Philip encountered an African man reading Isaiah 53 and not understanding it? Philip “began at the same Scripture” and preached Jesus (Acts 8:35). Could you do that? Could you begin at any random passage and direct the reader to Jesus? If not, why not? Become an expert in the Bible! Don’t let the message of God be dragged through the dirt by foul-mouthed or ignorant people. Don’t let people get away with blatantly misusing or misquoting Scripture. But won’t I be persecuted or ridiculed? Possibly--probably. If it happens, so be it. Jesus said in Matthew 5:10-12, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for

My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

ANGER OR HOSTILITY. This is a stronger reaction than curiosity or mockery. God’s word is like a sword--it cuts sometimes. Jesus said, “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword [to those who resist the truth]” (Matthew 10:34). How did Naaman react when Elisha delivered the word of the Lord to him? “Naaman became furious and went away....” (2 Kings 5:11). Another group that reacted with anger was the audience that heard Stephen’s sermon (just before they stoned him to death): “When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth.” As a young man, I was angry when I had my beliefs challenged. But I had to be honest and submit to God’s word. We cannot have it our way in religion.

OUTRIGHT REJECTION will be the reaction of some. In John 6, Jesus told His followers that unless they received His teachings, they would have no life in them. Verse 60 says, “Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, ‘This is a hard saying; who can understand it?’” Verse 66 says, “From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more.” What should we do when someone we are trying to teach refuses to accept the word of God? We do what Jesus did--*let them go*. Jesus did not go running after these disciples apologizing for offending them. Your loved ones might be receptive at some time in the future, but not now. So just leave the door open and grant them freedom of choice, as God grants us.

FEAR. The message of God is comforting to believers, but a terror to unbelievers. In Acts 24:24-25, we read, “And after some days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid....” The Bible depicts God’s goodness, but also His severity. Don’t apologize for that fear--it is a powerful motivator for a change of life.

PROCRASTINATION. In the same text there is another reaction: “Felix was afraid and answered, ‘Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you.’” Procrastination is one of Satan’s greatest tools. Most people intend to get right with God...some day. Just not today. A man asked a preacher, “When should I get right with God and be baptized?” The preacher replied, “One day before you

die.” But how do you know that day? Today is the time for salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2).

SORROW. Maybe *reluctance* is a better word. This was the reaction of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus asking what to do to inherit eternal life. The Lord told him to shed his wealth and follow Him. Luke 18:23 tells us, “He went away sorrowful, because he was very rich.” He wanted to have his cake and eat it too. He desired to divide his time between God and the world. I can remember when I came out of a denomination and into the Lord’s church, I was sad at giving up instrumental music in worship. But I was made infinitely better by leaving it behind.

These are some negative reactions to God’s word, of which there are many. But there are also some positive ones:

EAGER INVESTIGATION. Ah, bless the Bereans! They “were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11). It absolutely makes a preacher’s day when someone asks, “Can you explain this verse to me?”

A SINCERE DESIRE FOR INFORMATION AND DIRECTION. The Ethiopian eunuch had a receptive heart and asked a stranger to help him understand a passage in Isaiah (Acts 8:30-34). Acts 2:37 says of the people at Pentecost, “When they heard [Peter’s sermon], they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’” These Jews “gladly” received the word of God and acted on it (Acts 2:41). These folks were “cut to the heart” with remorse over the killing of Jesus. It’s remarkable to note the contrast between those and the ones who stoned Stephen:

- Acts 2:37--“When they heard this, they were cut to the heart” (and obeyed the gospel).
- Acts 7:54--“When they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and gnashed on him with their teeth” (murderous rage).

That’s the power of God’s word! This contrast is the key to understanding Isaiah 55:10-11. Remember, it reads: ““For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and

bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”

The same word was preached to the Jews who stoned Stephen and the Jews who obeyed the gospel on Pentecost. It hardened one group and softened another. Why? Because of the uncertain nature of the word of God? No, but because of the nature of the people.

Rain and snow will harden some soil and soften other soil. Sunlight will do the same thing. It's the same rain, and the same sun--the difference is in the nature and quality of the soil. In the parable of the sower, a man sows the same seed in different soils, and different crops result. It is not the fault of the seed, it's the receptivity of the soil (the human heart).

We said at the beginning that every person who hears God's word will react to it in some way. They will either be drawn closer to God or be hardened against God to some degree, *based on the condition of their hearts*. Paul said it this way, speaking of the preaching of the apostles: “For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. 16 To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Corinthians 2:15-16).

So don't have unrealistic expectations about people's reaction to the Bible when you share it with them. Be prepared for different responses, but pray for soft hearts and receptive minds. And trust God's word to do what God intends for it to do. The power is in it, not in you. --John Temples

