

Offering to Molech

M. W. Bassford, 5-23-10

One of the central ideas of Christianity is that we are not here only for ourselves. We are not here to pursue a solitary pattern of existence as servants of God, and then, at the end of our lives, to receive the reward of heaven. Nor, in fact, are we here only for ourselves and for other Christians. Otherwise, we could all pool our resources, buy an isolated patch of land out in the middle of Montana, and live in our own little commune, safely isolated from the world.

Instead, as Christians, we are responsible for speaking righteously and living righteously not only before each other, but before the entire world. The reason why God does not want us to live together in an isolated commune is precisely because He expects us to have an influence for good on outsiders. In Matthew 13, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to leaven that a woman took and kneaded into meal, so that the entire amount of meal was leavened. That's the way we are to be as Christians. God expects us to be like yeast in bread dough. We are not like the world, but we exist in the world anyway, and we have work to do in the world. Only as we carry out this God-given work of leavening can the world become a better place. Without us, all that's left is an unleavened lump of evil.

Sadly, our society is desperately in need of this leaven of morality. Whatever we may think about the doctrines of the denominational world of 100 or 150 years ago, at least the denominations back then taught Biblical morality and expected their members to lead righteous lives. Today, that is becoming less and less true. With each passing year, this country becomes more and more ignorant of the Bible, and its behavior becomes more and more wicked. That means that the people around us need us more than ever. To illustrate the greatness of this need, let's examine one of the more appalling parts of the Old Testament record. Let's consider what the Bible has to say about offering to Molech.

Molech Himself.

People who aren't familiar with the Old Testament probably aren't too familiar with Molech either. For that matter, even the scholars don't know a whole lot about him. We do know from the Scripture that just like Dagon was the god of the Philistines and Chemosh was the god of the Moabites, Molech was the god of the Ammonites.

In short, Molech was not exactly a dominant feature of the religious landscape 3500 years ago, and yet the Law of Moses contains an explicit **PROHIBITION** against worshipping him. Look with me at Leviticus 20:1-3. The rule was simple: if you gave one of your children to Molech, you died. The text continues on to say that if the people tolerate Molech worship, then God would take vengeance Himself both on the worshiper and on those who condoned his behavior. As we know, there were hundreds, perhaps thousands of false gods in the Middle East at the time the Law was written. The Israelites weren't supposed to honor any of them. And yet, of all of those hundreds and hundreds of idols whose worship God could have specifically condemned, the only one whom the Law singles out is Molech. Moses doesn't enact a statute against the worship of Baal, the worship of Ashtoreth, the worship of the queen of heaven, or anyone else. Just Molech. Even though God hated all idols, He regarded the worship of Molech with particular disgust.

It's not hard to figure out why God felt this way when we consider what the worship of Molech involved. In this text, when Moses describes giving one's children to Molech, that's not some kind of spiritual dedication. That's a sacrifice. Consider with me Leviticus 18:21. When the children "passed through the fire", they didn't come out the other side. Instead, they were burned alive. Although the rabbinical writings on the subject are not entirely to be trusted, they describe a giant bull-headed image made of bronze, with a furnace in its belly. The children were placed in the furnace and roasted while the devotees of Molech pounded on drums outside to drown out the sound of the children's cries. Nor were the children to be sacrificed some foreigner's children who had been captured in battle, although that would have been bad enough. Instead, they were the sons and daughters of the worshipers who were doing the sacrificing.

Now, we might think that such a horrifying, abominable sin would be a sin that the Israelites wouldn't have any trouble avoiding. Nonetheless, the history of Israel tells us of the **VIOLATION** of even this commandment. Apparently it began, as so much else did, during the reign of Solomon. Solomon led Israel to its greatest glories ever, but he also sowed the seeds of its destruction. We read about this particular seed in 1 Kings 11:7-8. Solomon is famous for all of his foreign wives, and this is one of the things that the foreign wives led to. Apparently, he had some wives from Ammon, they wanted a place to worship Molech just like they did back home, and Solomon obliged them. The text doesn't specifically say that Solomon himself offered his children to Molech. It just says that his wives made sacrifice to their gods. However, if Solomon only closed his ears to the drumming that came from the hills, he shared in their guilt. The sin of Solomon with respect to Molech was one of the reasons that God took ten tribes away from his son.

Solomon might not have participated in the sacrifice of children himself, but that certainly wasn't true of some of his descendants. 2 Chronicles 28:1-3 tells the story. Jesus had some real stinkers among his ancestors in the flesh, but Ahaz must have been one of the worst. The only good thing that Ahaz ever did, according to the Scriptural record, was

to father Hezekiah, who went on to become a good king. One can't help but wonder if the reason why Hezekiah became good was because he was so repulsed by the things his father did, and this would have been one of the most repulsive. By this time, the worship of Molech has shifted from the high places that Solomon built to a valley called the Valley of Hinnom, from which we get the word "Gehenna", which is another term for hell. It's easy to see why the Jews associated this valley with hell. In that place, Ahaz, probably along with many others, burned his own children alive. Maybe Ahaz only did this when he was desperate, when he thought that he really needed Molech's help for something, but it doesn't really matter why. It just matters that he did. He carried out the unthinkable and murdered his own children.

Of course, this practice wasn't only confined to the kings of Judah. It was something the common people practiced too. We see God describe their mindset in an illuminating way in Ezekiel 23:37-39. By the point in time that Ezekiel describes, the people of Judah hadn't just started burning their children alive. They'd gotten blasé about it. They'd roast a son or daughter, and then they'd bop on up to the temple and worship God like they hadn't done anything wrong. That speaks to an appallingly calloused heart. It didn't even occur to these people to think, "I've done one of the things that God hates most, so maybe I'd better avoid Him for a little bit." Nope. There they were, offering God's sacrifices with hands stained with innocent blood. I can't even imagine what those evil, foolish people were thinking.

In the face of such provocation, God's **REACTION** was devastating. We see what happened to the northern nation of Israel in 2 Kings 17:17-18. This text comes at the end of a long litany of Israel's sin, but the author clearly regards Israel's worship of Molech as one of the worst things they did. The result of their evil was not that God simply became angry. He became very angry. This is not a common phrase. In fact, in the whole rest of the Bible, it's only used one other time. Just think for a moment what it would be like to have God be very angry with you. That thought makes my blood run cold. And yet, that's the anger that the Israelites awakened by offering their children to Molech.

The same thing happened to Judah. Another king who engaged in the worship of Molech was Manasseh, the grandson of Ahaz. We see what God thinks of him in 2 Kings 21:10-12. This text is an important switch in God's attitude toward Judah. Before this, all of God's prophets say, "God is going to destroy you unless you repent." From here on out, the message is "God is going to destroy you." Things have gone so far and the people have provoked God so much that He refuses even to give them another chance. One of the main causes of this was the worship of Molech.

Application.

Now, all of this is a fascinating but ultimately irrelevant tour of ancient history, right? At the end of the sermon, we can walk out the door and go home and eat our Sunday dinner without having to deal with Molech. After all, it's not like modern America has a problem with parents killing their own children, does it?

There may not be a bull-headed furnace on every corner, but the most recent statistics that I've seen say that in this country, 3600 children are aborted every day. That works out to about 1.3 million abortions per year, give or take a few thousand murdered babies, and these are babies that we're talking about. The Scripture clearly teaches that children in the womb have an identity and a soul, and that's enough for us, but even people who don't believe in the Bible have an intuitive sense that those children are alive. Otherwise, why would even those who favor abortion say that abortion should be rare? If it's just a lump of tissue, who cares? I've never heard anyone say that appendectomies should be rare.

The truth is that everyone knows, deep down inside, that abortions destroy life. It's just that there are other things they care about more. Abortions may not be sacrifices to Molech, but with a few medical exceptions aside, they are sacrifices to the self. Sometimes they are sacrifices to convenience, as when parents don't want to care for a child they know will be born with health problems or don't want to care for a child at all. Sometimes, they are sacrifices to pride. I've known Christian women who had abortions because they didn't want others to find out about their immoral lifestyle. Sometimes, they are sacrifices to desperation. In the end, though, it doesn't matter why. It just matters what.

This takes us, then, to our application. First, we need to recognize what this tells us about our time. Look at Peter's assessment of his own time in Acts 2:40. Like that generation, our generation is perverse, and its tolerance of abortion proves that fact. We aren't just a little bit off from what God wants us to be. We're a lot off, and although I don't know for sure, I suspect that He is becoming very angry with us. All too soon, we may find out.

Second, the presence of such a great evil in our midst teaches us how important it is for us to be lights. Jesus calls us to this in Matthew 5:14-16. Clearly, we don't shine by murdering abortionists, as deranged men do from time to time. It is impossible to overcome evil with evil. Many Christians believe that they must shine through political action, and if you do, that's fine. I fear, though, that all such efforts will prove futile. The laws of this country will not change unless the hearts of this country change first, and those hearts are beyond the reach of any political process.

Instead, we work against this evil as individuals, by shining with the light of Christ. More than anything else, the world around us needs to find its way back to God through His word. If we hate abortion and the other evils of our time, the best thing we can do is to lead as many people to Jesus as possible, and to influence those who will not return. Every person we persuade is a victory in the battle against evil, and every victory makes the darkness a little less dark.