

If I Load It, They Will Come!

*And if the sentinel sees the sword coming upon the land
and blows the shofar and warns the people,
then if any who hear the sound of the shofar do not take warning . . .
their blood shall be upon their own heads . . .
But if the sentinel sees the sword coming and does not blow the shofar,
So that the people are not warned . . .
their blood I will require at the sentinel's hand.
(Ezekiel 33:3-4, 6)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 12th Sunday after Pentecost, **August 12, 2018**
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A recent poll asked a group of struggling inner city young adults what they imagined was their best opportunity to become wealthy, pathways they thought most accessible to them. Traditional avenues such as education, hard work, and wise investments, while not absent from the list, didn't make the top five. Among the top five potential avenues to wealth they identified were "winning the lottery," "inheritance from an unknown relative," and even, believe it or not, just "finding" the money.

One of the poll's most telling answers in that list was "winning an injury lawsuit." Being injured by someone else or on someone else's property or through someone else's negligence, particularly if that someone else is a large corporation, was high on the pathway to riches list. (*Forbes* reports an average of 5000 lawsuits filed against Walmart each year, 14 per day.)

Operating a business in such a litigious environment is motivation for businesses to seek to be as safe as they can be for customers entering their stores or consuming their products. (This is true for churches as well, leading to meticulously designed *Safe Sanctuary* policies). One of the primary ways businesses have to make sure the product they are offering is used safely is through urging caution, affixing warning labels at the places customers enter and on the products they purchase. It's no wonder, for example, when I used the drive through at a fast food restaurant recently, I saw a warning at the window, in bold letters: "Caution! Our coffees and chocolates are VERY hot!"



This, of course, is due to the infamous case in 1992 when a New Mexico jury awarded a customer \$2.9 million from McDonald's because a spilled cup of coffee heated significantly

beyond industry standards caused the woman to have 3rd degree burns over 6% of her body. When the judge reduced the award to \$640,000 one juror said, defending the original award, "we wanted to send a message that the coffee's too hot out there."

The proliferation of warning labels we see in our day is because companies wishing to absolve themselves of culpability in the event their product is used in an ill-advised and unsafe manner. In the language of Ezekiel, the don't wanting anyone's blood on their hands. They want to be able to say, when their day in court comes, "We are absolved from all responsibility. We alerted you to all potential danger associated with the use of our product. We blew the shofar!"



Caution advisories cataloguing every conceivable peril from the use of a product have mushroomed, manufacturers protecting themselves by issuing every warning they can dream up, treating the consumer with the nervous mentality of a mother trailing a toddler. One Sears hair dryer sports nineteen different warnings, including warnings not to use while in the shower or while sleeping. I love the warning on a pair of shin pads for bicyclists, "Shin pads cannot protect any part of the body they do not cover." Another of my favorites is the warning on an electric rotary tool, "This product not intended for use as a dental drill." You never know when someone will try to save money as a do-it-yourself dentist in the garage! Then there's the warning on that foldable reflector keeping the sun from over-heating your car on these hot summer days, "Do not drive with sunshield in place." Oh, and, a baby stroller warning, "Remove child before folding."

We love our labels. *Candid Camera* had an episode in the 60's in which two telephone booths were placed next to each other in New York City, one labeled "Men" and the other "Women." The booth labeled "Men" was kept occupied, setting up the hilarity when no self-respecting man would enter the empty telephone booth marked "Women." So great is our in-born respect for signs that men didn't seem to question why telephone booths had to be gender specific. I doubt the experiment would yield the same results today as in the 60s!

The New York Post ran a story on November 30, 1971, reporting that five heavily armed men shot out the glass doors of a New York bank and rushed in firing, wounding twelve people. One of the bank's tellers slipped out, chased by one of the armed bank robbers. She made it to the women's restroom upstairs, refusing to come out as he stood outside and shouted profanity. At last he returned to help his colleagues finish the job. He might be a thief and be willing to maim or kill in pursuit of his crime, but he would not violate the sanctity of the Ladies' restroom!

Again, speaking of gender specific restrooms it hardly needs comment on how the times have changed. Still, we do pay attention to labels. As a child, I recall wondering about those tags on

pillows that said, "*Under penalty of law this tag not to be removed except by consumer.*" Not knowing what the word "*consumer*" meant, I was extremely careful with that label, not risking doing anything wrong, lest the pillow agents find me out and tear me away from mom and dad, a lawless child clutching his illegally tag-less pillow!

Label-conscious we are. We expect to be forewarned about any and all jeopardy we may face. "*Somebody should have warned me not to fold up that stroller with little Jimmy still in it. Somebody should have warned me that my shin pad would not protect my chin, also – shin/chin, spelled and sounds almost alike, after all.*"

Ours is a warning rich environment, and perhaps churches should take advantage since, from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is full of warnings. God's first caution advisory was in Eden. "*Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day you eat thereof you shall surely die!*" There it is, God's first warning label stuck right on the tree, in plain view and bold letters.

If the Bible opens with a warning, it also closes with a warning in Revelation's last chapter: *I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that the person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city. (Revelation 22:18-19)*

Throughout the Bible words and phrases like "*beware,*" "*watch,*" "*be vigilant,*" and "*guard yourself,*" are common vocabulary. But surely no warning-meister reaches the level of eloquence and urgency as that expressed by Ezekiel in our text. Charles Spurgeon playfully instructed his preaching students, "*When you preach on heaven, let your face light up with heavenly glow. And when you preach on hell -- well, your everyday face will do!*" It was certainly Ezekiel's everyday face! Lest we think the New Testament altered this alert mentality, consider these words of Paul to the elders of Ephesus: "*Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock . . . I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock . . . therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears*" (Acts 20:28,29,31).

Forty-four years ago, at age 20, I offered my life for ministry at Cathedral Baptist Church in Jonesboro. I had been in the pulpit in my home church only two or three times when I was asked by a church in Newark, Arkansas to lead a youth revival. Since I had played basketball at ASU, they thought a college basketball player who left the court to enter ministry would be a draw. At the conclusion of the Sunday morning service, crowded with young people, I pulled out a starter pistol. Taking a bullet I acted as if I was loading the gun, spun the cartridge, pointed it to my head, and announced that if they would come back for the evening service and bring their friends, I would pull the trigger three times during a sermon titled "*Spiritual Russian Roulette.*" I suppose I was thinking, "*If I load it, they will come!*"

They came. The evening service was packed. Taking Hebrews 9:27 as my text, "*It is appointed to man once to die, and after that, the judgment,*" I began the sermon. That afternoon I had

loaded the pistol with a cap set to fire the third time I pulled the trigger, planned for that invitational moment just before we sang *Just As I Am*. Oh, if only someone had stupid-proofed that gun with a label for a foolish twenty year old preacher-boy: “*Warning! Do not fire close to your head during a youth-led Revival!*”

The moment of truth came. The lights, on cue, were turned low by the ushers. I pulled the trigger. The pistol went off. I wish it hadn't. The noise in the small church was deafening. Sparks flew into the darkness. As I gripped the pulpit to steady my staggering and invited the organist forward, my head was pounding, a little fellow in my cranium with a sledge hammer pounding ear to ear, saying, “*Never, never, never do that again! If this is preaching, we are going back to Accounting class!*” My hair was smoking (you may think my hair turned silver gradually, but an argument could be made that it happened at that very moment!). It did, however, scare the daylights out of a few children, three young, terrified boys walking the aisle to profess faith in Christ, among my first evangelistic conversions.

I've not since taken a pistol into the pulpit, nor will I ever, though while I'm sure I would never adopt that style of preaching again, I do hope never to lose a sense of urgency in inviting people to the life-transforming power of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

I want to close with the story of Bob and Thelma Sibley, our friends during our ten years in Ann Arbor. We attended church together at Packard Road Baptist Church. One day, just before Christmas 1994, their five year old daughter Nancy went out to the playground of the daycare center with the rest of the children. She never came back. As the teachers were helping the children take off their coats after recess, they noticed Nancy was absent. She had broken away from the other children to run back to the spiral slide for one last thrill. The drawstring of her coat hung on the slide, flipping her over the side of the slide, she dangling by the drawstring around her neck. The teachers arrived too late.

Devastated, Bob and Thelma became passionate about warning others, especially when they discovered that in the previous decade seventeen other children had died and forty-two injured by drawstring entanglement with slides, cribs, fences, an escalator, a ski chair lift, and more. They learned that manufacturers of children's clothing had taken no action to increase the use of Velcro, or to research safer mechanisms to fasten children's winter wear. The industry seemed to consider a couple of children's deaths per year an unavoidable consequence, however unfortunate, of their product. The blood was on their hands, and they weren't blowing the shofar to warn parents of the dangers of drawstrings.

After Nancy's funeral, Bob and Thelma took upon themselves the work of warning parents and schools and clothing manufacturers, in hope of saving other children. I'll never forget that funeral, how it gave birth to an Ezekiel-like urgency to warn others, so that no parent would ever have to experience another such funeral. Tirelessly, they sent out warnings. Thelma was stunned to discover that drawstrings had already been removed from children's clothing in Great Britain nearly 20 years before, in 1976, and that the Canadian province of Ontario, just across our border from Michigan, had taken similar action in 1988, following the drawstring strangulations of five children.

Thelma organized a campaign that began small, in our church, and then mushroomed, parents pulling the drawstrings out of their children's clothing by the thousands and mailing them to Bob and Thelma's home. Thelma prayed over each one, seeing a potential life saved. Before long several state and national politicians got involved. Bob and Thelma were interviewed by Diane Sawyer on *PrimeTime Live* and featured in 1996 on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*. Chairman Ann Brown of the *Consumer Products Safety Commission* joined the chorus, and this warning was developed . . .

Soon manufacturers voluntarily agreed to remove hood and neck drawstrings from over twenty million garments. Today, consumers would be hard-pressed to find a drawstring on any article of children's clothing.

Nancy would have been 29 years old this year. I know they wish someone had been there to warn them. I know also that they are thankful for the lives of so many children saved as a result of their campaign to warn the public of this danger.

They blew the shofar!

