

OLD TESTAMENT LESSONS FOR NEW TESTAMENT RENEWAL

Sunday, June 20th and 27th, 2010, 10:00 a.m. - Teaching #'s 1381 & 1383

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MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT RENEWAL AND HOW GOD WANTS HIS WORK SUSTAINED IN OUR HEARTS

1 Samuel 7:1-13 - "And the men of Kiriath-jearim came and took up the ark of the Lord and brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill. And they consecrated his son Eleazar to have charge of the ark of the Lord. [2] From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord. [3] And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." [4] So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and they served the Lord only. [5] Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you." [6] So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the Lord and fasted on that day and said there, "We have sinned against the Lord." And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah. [7] Now when the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines. [8] And the people of Israel said to Samuel, "Do not cease to cry out to the Lord our God for us, that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines." [9] So Samuel took a nursing lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. And Samuel cried out to the Lord for Israel, and the Lord answered him. [10] As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel. But the Lord thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion, and they were routed before Israel. [11] And the men of Israel went out from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them, as far as below Beth-car. [12] Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer; for he said, "Till now the Lord has helped us." [13] So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel. And the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel."

There are good reasons for this being one of my favourite preaching texts. History shows that people have always tended to drift back and forth in their relationship with God. There have always been times of spiritual declension and times of spiritual renewal. And it's right here that this text needs study today. That word *renewal* is being used a lot right now. Sometimes accurately and sometimes quite carelessly.

But here we have a clear case of people who drift from God and want to come back. But, at least at first, they don't come back the right way. Then the Lord teaches them the true way - the fruitful way - to make their approach to Him. And that has to be important to today's church.

1) THIS PASSAGE TRACES ONE OF THE BLEAKEST TIMES IN ISRAEL'S SPIRITUAL HISTORY

There are always certain, sure *signs* when things aren't well in the hearts of God's people. And they haven't changed with the passing of centuries:

- a) ***The worship had become corrupt and immoral.*** People saw no connection between how they expressed their praise in the sanctuary and how they lived the rest of their lives throughout the week. Our account says even the priesthood had corrupted the worship of God - **1 Samuel 2:12-17** - "Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the Lord. [13] The custom of the priests with the people was that when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand, [14] and he would thrust it into the pan or kettle or cauldron or pot. All that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there. [15] Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, "Give meat for the priest to roast, for he will not accept boiled meat from you but only raw." [16] And if the man said to him, "Let them burn the fat first, and then take as much as you wish," he would say, "No, you must give it now, and if not, I will take it by force." [17] Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the Lord, for the men treated the offering of the Lord with contempt."
- b) ***The Word of God was not being declared and received.*** **1 Samuel 3:1** - "Now the young man Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision."

It's amazing and frightening how people can keep the trappings of their religion going long after the presence of God has departed. Also, notice the connection between these two points about the **worship being corrupt** and the **Word not being heard**. Whenever the Word is missing worship will not stay on track.

- c) ***The tabernacle was dismantled and the ark taken from its proper place. 1 Samuel 7:1-2 - "And the men of Kiriath-jearim came and took up the ark of the Lord and brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill. And they consecrated his son Eleazar to have charge of the ark of the Lord. [2] From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord."***

There's really only one new point in these words. But it is worth noting that not only can people ignore the principles of God's authority in their worship. They can do it for **twenty years!** Why did they wait so long to come to their senses? Like all of us, they were more **driven** back to God by the pain of their sin and rebellion than the wisdom of their own hearts. The Philistines were now breathing down their necks. They were worried about their future existence. And the lesson here is it's easy to ignore the **wickedness** of our rebellion against God and yet **continue** in it until we start to feel the **pain** of our own sinfulness.

Is there something God is trying to tell you? How long has He been speaking to you? I'll tell you this, **it's probably a lot longer than you calculate**. Spiritual procrastination is only short from **our** perspective, not **God's**.

2) WHEN TRUE WORSHIP DECLINES, IDOLATRY FLOURISHES

1 Samuel 7:1-3 - "And the men of Kiriath-jearim came and took up the ark of the Lord and brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill. And they consecrated his son Eleazar to have charge of the ark of the Lord. [2] From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord. [3] And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashteroth from among you and direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines."

Underline two important verbs in verse 3 - "**return**" and "**put away**." Underline both of them because you can't have one without the other. And right there - **exactly right there** - is the greatest flaw in much of the renewal of the contemporary church.

When I say both those words need to be underlined I'm really saying this: When true worship is in decline, people automatically become victims of fallen passions and spiritual powers beyond their control.

Now, they never **see** this happening. But it does. Man won't live life empty very long. He will be full of something. So will you. So will your marriage. So will your home. So will your kids. It's dangerous not to be a person of Scriptural worship. And it's dangerous not to be a person of frequent worship. And consider this - the average Christian - the average **Pentecostal Christian is involved in corporate worship about 50% less often than they did one generation ago**.

That's what you see in this passage. The ark is gone. The tabernacle is dismantled. The Word is forgotten. When God is ignored people will fall in love with something else. After a while, God isn't even missed. People might **think** they want God back. But they usually don't.

And that leads into the next point:

3) THERE IS A STEP CHRISTIANS COMMONLY TAKE TO GET BACK TO GOD THAT LOOKS LIKE RENEWAL BUT ISN'T

1 Samuel 7:2 - "From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty

years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord.”

“And all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD” - And they’ve been doing that for twenty years! If that weren’t recorded in Scripture it would be unbelievable. Imagine what happened in this passage. It’s not that hard to do.

The people have been sensing something wrong for about twenty years. They sense the lack of power over their enemies. They’re beginning to resent the cruel domination of the Philistines. They know God never meant for it to all end like this. They start to feel the futility of having a God in theory but never knowing His presence and power.

And everyone **should** feel the emptiness of that kind of religion. It’s just too bad we usually take so long to wake up to it. Then they start to feel the weight of their sins in their hearts and national life. They know God must have something better for them than this. So they do what we all do. They start to long for God. They start to pray. They begin to call upon His Name. Maybe they claim promises. They organize meetings. And they do all of this for years!

Now here’s the point to all of this. **People and churches come to that point all the time.** They get frustrated over some bad habit. They are shocked awake by the announcement of their spouse’s intention to leave. Their kids are in jail. They feel guilty because they know they don’t pray anymore. They’re ashamed at the way they constantly cave in to grimy temptations.

Then somewhere along the way they’re going to sit in some church somewhere and hear a stirring message on revival. They’ll feel bad about their life. They’ll feel convicted. Probably they’ll go forward and kneel at some altar or be prayed for by somebody. Maybe they’ll break down and shed tears. Just like Israel - “**Lamenting after the Lord**”(7:2b).

Notice that even before Samuel confronts them, they’ve been lamenting after the Lord. Probably for years. But it has all been so empty and fruitless. And **this is the part of the message we must heed today - they’ve been lamenting after the Lord to no avail because they’ve left out two important steps that should have come first.**

Truly, Samuel doesn’t do anything all that special in his instructions. What he **does** do is stop them and back them up. He then gives some mid-course corrections of their road back to God.

4) **SAMUEL INSTRUCTS THE PEOPLE HOW TO BE FRUITFUL IN THEIR RETURN TO THE LORD**

He says they need to do two things:

- a) ***They need to put away all idols - 1 Samuel 7:3a - “And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, “If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you....”***

The message from Samuel is, “If you are serious about following the Lord, here’s the place to prove it!” I sometimes try to picture how our pluralistic age would respond to some modern day Samuel who appeared on the scene and announced that the religious practices of a whole nation were worthless and no good.

Yet that’s exactly what Samuel does. “If you want to have Jehovah as your God, you must come to Him alone and you must come fully on His terms - not yours.” God will receive no worship from a **divided heart**. He wants purity of heart. Purity of heart doesn’t just mean **moral purity**. It means a heart **undiluted by any other passions or affections.**

Most of us know that in our hearts. These people in Israel knew it too. They had heard words like, “**You shall love the Lord they God with all your heart, soul and strength**”, or, “**You shall have no other god’s before Me!**”

There was no doubting God’s passion for their hearts alone. That’s not the **truth** they had forgotten. Nor

have we. Here's the truth they had forgotten, as Christians have always so easily forgotten: God isn't loved at all if He's loved **selectively**. He can't be loved properly from a crowded heart. So, in any fresh coming to God there will be required a fresh putting to death of something else.

That's the truth they had forgotten. They had made their love for God **verbal** rather than **vocational**. And that's why they just went on and on lamenting after the Lord all those years to no avail. And that is also why so many hearts are so temporarily and shallowly stirred after God today. God doesn't just come to anybody on any terms. ***Room is made for Him.***

That's the first thing Samuel tells the people. And it's a telling point. The real problem in times of spiritual decline is rarely out and out denial or even disliking God. The problem is one of loving something else **too much**. The relationship with God dies of neglect, not denial. Now for the next thing:

- b) ***They need to return to the Lord not only in worship, but in service - 1 Samuel 7:3b - "...If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines."***

Here is a Biblical picture of shallow spirituality. We can learn so much from it. Shallow spirituality would rather **worship** than **serve** - any day. Not that worship isn't good and right. It is. Not that worship isn't very important. It is.

"Well, then where's the mistake, pastor Don?"

The mistake is worship, all by itself, certainly can be life-**initiating**. But it is never able, all by itself, to be life-**sustaining**. And it's not meant to be. Worship is meant to be the **beginning** of my life poured out to the Lord. It's meant to function as the **starter** of spiritual formation. It's not the end of the process. It's the beginning. Praise and adoration and expressed thankfulness are firewood in the fireplace of holiness and devoted services to God.

This is an important point of mature understanding. Worship is beautiful. But we distort worship if we think it is **all** God wants from us. Not only must worship be **pure**, it must come from a **servant**. You just can't miss how important service is in Samuel's words to the people in the last part of verse 3 - **1 Samuel 7:3b** - ***".... direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines."***

- i) ***Service directs (or prepares) hearts for the entry of God's presence and power.***

There is such a difference between **wanting** something and **preparing** for it. I might wish I were a great pianist. But I've never prepared for it. I might wish I were a great athlete. But I've never trained and prepared for it.

And there are people here listening to me right now who wish they had a better marriage, but don't direct their hearts toward it and prepare for it. There are people here right now who, if a closer walk with the Lord came from a pill would buy out all the drug stores. But it doesn't. And they don't know God all that well after years of lamenting after His Name.

That's what Samuel is working with here. He's trying to get this group of people, all of whom know something is wrong with their spiritual state, to quit whining after the Lord and make some good, solid decisions.

And here's the first thing he says. ***Serving God prepares the heart to know God. Serving God gets people ready for God.***

There's a second idea under this point about serving God:

- ii) ***Serving God breaks the back of the enemy - 1 Samuel 7:3b - “....direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.”***

Samuel's words are striking. There comes a point where deliverance doesn't come from merely **praying** for it. It sometimes **looks** like it comes from just prayer when others see prayer arising from a heart of trust and obedience, but there's another invisible foundation **underneath** that kind of prayer life.

When would God's deliverance come? When they begin to serve the Lord - when they built a consistency into the core of their being that prayed and served and worshipped in the same direction.

I think there is a buried treasure of truth here for those who have the courage to dig it up and embrace it. Could this be why we have so many people who can raise their hands but not invite anyone to church? Is this why people can sing and shout but not give one tenth of their actual income to take the gospel to the lost? Why do we have so many professing Christians who don't even know what moral purity is anymore? Why can we listen to sermons but not resist temptation?

Service breaks the back of the enemy. Until you serve, you're vulnerable. Until you serve, you're not safe or whole.

It's interesting to see how this passage in 1 Samuel ends. The last line of verse 13 goes like this: **“So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel. And the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines *all the days of Samuel.*”**

Notice, the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines ***all the days of Samuel.*** Why just the days of Samuel? What happened after that? The people forgot Samuel's warning. God honored this true message. When the people forgot the truth, bondage ensued, proving we can't learn the truth of this text just **once** for all time. You and I must **unpack** this truth every day like we learn the alphabet just once, but use it to read every day of our lives.

5) **SAMUEL UNITED THE PEOPLE IN A SOLID, COLLECTIVE RESPONSE OF FAITH AND OBEDIENCE**

1 Samuel 7:6 - “So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the Lord and fasted on that day and said there, “We have sinned against the Lord.” And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah.”

Perhaps we learn one of the biggest lessons of all right here. Samuel is going to teach the people ***how to make a Godly decision.*** He's going to help them understand how spiritual momentum is turned into spiritual reformation. It takes more than just ***desire.***

Underscore that little word ***“there”*** in **verse 6** - **“So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the Lord and fasted on that day and said there, “We have sinned against the Lord.” And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah.”**

Samuel won't let them escape this moment of decision. It's not that they ***“thought”*** these things, or ***“said to themselves,”*** or simply ***“decided.”*** They all ***said aloud - choose together*** - right ***“there.”*** Where? At ***Mizpah.*** There was a time and a place where they ***covenanted together.*** They became accountable to each other. This wasn't a whim or a feeling or an impulse. The time and place were ***markable*** - like the day WWII ended, or John F. Kennedy was assassinated, or the World Trade Towers were levelled in 911. Samuel wants this day at Mizpah to be unforgettable.

There is great power in people united in desire before the Lord. Especially this kind of meeting. ***Notice the change in this verse from the lamenting after the Lord in verse 3.*** There, the people were lamenting their miseries. They felt bad about God's absence. They missed Him. They hated their painful situation under the hand

of the Philistines. And for all of these reasons they cried out to God for years.

But there's something new in **verse 6** - "**So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the Lord and fasted on that day and said there, 'We have sinned against the Lord.' And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah.**"

This is a **huge** change of heart. This is like when those massive plates of the earth's surface shift deep under the ocean and cause a tsunami. There is great spiritual power being unleashed here. Under the steering hand of Samuel, they start to look at the **cause** of all their misery. They start to call the trouble **sin. Their sin!** They're not weeping because of their **suffering**. They're weeping because of their **guilt**.

Then we read something very strange. The people pour water out on the ground before the Lord (6). This is a passage that sets all the scholars guessing. There's only one other place in the whole Bible where this is even referred to. It's a brief phrase by a woman in **2 Samuel 14:14** - "**We must all die; we are like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again....**"

"...Like water spilled on the ground **which cannot be gathered up again.**" I think that's the idea. Something is poured out that is not taken back. You can play **pick-up-sticks** because you can pick up the sticks. But try to pick up water after you watered your lawn.

This little ceremony pictured a decision that was permanent (at least during the days of Samuel). And we must make a mental note of what **made** the decision to follow the Lord permanent. It was permanent because it wasn't rooted in the **feelings** of the people but in the **service** of the people. This wasn't talk. It was change. It was action.

You can see this lesson all through the Scriptures. This was the kind of repentance John the baptist talked about:

Luke 3:8-17 - "**Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. [9] Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.**" [10] And the crowds asked him, "**What then shall we do?**" [11] And he answered them, "**Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise. [12] Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' [13] And he said to them, 'Collect no more than you are authorized to do.'**"

[14] "**Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.'**" [15] As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, [16] John answered them all, saying, "**I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. [17] His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.**"

"**We have Abraham as our father!**" There it is. That's relying on **religion** or **tradition** or **heritage** rather than calling sin, sin and permanently changing your ways. And those closing words about judgment should wake us all up - **Luke 3:17** - "**His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.**"

Those are words about the nature of the coming judgment of the Lord. And the judgment is mentioned specifically in relation to the kind of repentance offered. "**Don't think any other form of repentance will save you. It won't. If it doesn't change the actions it's chaff. And that chaff will not survive the coming judgment!**"

Note that the chaff aren't the **non-religious** people. Jesus isn't aiming these words at **atheists**. They are the people who talk about God and talk about repentance but never get around to dealing seriously with either one.

6) SAMUEL REMINDS THE PEOPLE OF GOD'S FAITHFULNESS IF THEY WILL OBEY

1 Samuel 7:12 - "Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer; for he said, "Till now the Lord has helped us."

"Ebenezer" means "stone of help." You've probably sung about it without knowing the precise meaning of the words in the hymn, **"Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing."** We all sing, "Here I raise mine Ebenezer, hither by thy help I'm come. And I hope by Thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home."

This is another great lesson. It's such a great lesson the hymn writer wanted the church to be singing it in their worship gatherings. How prone we all are to make great plans for the Lord when we're in a jam and then forget about them as soon as things calm down. Samuel's not stupid. He knows what we are all like. So Samuel builds an altar for the people. And, equally important to note, it's an altar made, not out of **paper**, but out of **stone**.

We need the kind of Godly reminders that are solid and unbendable. We need things that smack us out of worldliness. We need the kind of altars we can't avoid **bumping into**. We constantly need things that knock us out of carelessness. Here's what this stone was all about:

a) ***It was to remind them of all they had promised to the Lord.***

I've often thought of how much better it might be for a lot of us if all our promises to the Lord didn't just spin out of our mouths and minds but actually turned into solid rock right in front of us. So every time I get forgetful I would just walk right into them. WHAM! And then rub my sore head and say, "O yea, that's what I said when I gave my heart to Jesus" (or at my baptism, or when my children were dedicated, or at my marriage vows, or at that altar).

b) ***It was to remind them of God's presence and power as they worked to remain true to Him.*** The stone reminded the people they had more to rely on than their own will-power. Those two words are so instructive - ***"Thus far the Lord has helped us..."(7:12).*** ***"Thus far..."*** That means ***up to this point.***

Don't we need to consider that? Aren't we all inclined to allow steadfast pursuit of God to settle into lifeless religious routines? Past gracious works of God must constantly be brought to fresh life in the present.

And there's ***encouragement*** here too. God's heart to sustain and bless and enable is the same today as it has always been. The same God who ***delivered*** them would ***sustain*** them. He was not whimsical in His commitment to them. He was not just some emotional high to make them feel better. He could be counted on through all the times and seasons of life.

This is how faith is always constructed. All through the Scriptures people looked ***back*** on God's goodness with thankfulness. And they then looked ***forward*** in anticipation to the same faithfulness from God's hand in the future. That's called ***hope***.

"Samuel, make that Ebenezer out of solid rock!" One thing is certain. It's not God who blows hot and cold. We do. Just as surely as that rock - that stone of help - that solid altar Ebenezer - was unbendable and sure, David said of the man who learned to ***honor the Lord daily*** - ***"His leaf shall not wither, and whatever he does, prospers"***