

I Samuel

Lesson 10 - Chapter 7

Indulge me please as I begin today's lesson with a brief personal sermon that I think is pertinent in connecting our study of 1st Samuel with conditions present in our time. Because afterwards this is going to get personal for you; and if you're paying attention today, before all is said and done this may be one of the more difficult lessons to deal with. The kind that keeps you awake worried, sad, or mad at me.

It tickles me to no end when someone approaches me (as a couple of folks did this past week) and says that the light bulb finally came on in their heads and now they can readily see as obvious that without understanding the cultures and societies and rituals of the people of the Bible in the setting of their own ancient terms, the Bible is nearly unintelligible despite what we thought we knew.

Due to the Christian church's historic propensity to practically demonize the Old Testament, and to view the history of Israel as largely irrelevant since (in the eyes of many theologians) God has rejected Israel and replaced it with the Church in His redemptive plan, then it goes without saying that to give the Older Covenant, the opening books of the Bible, more than a good skim-reading is anywhere from a waste of time to possibly even heresy if one gives it too much credence.

Hopefully all of you who follow Torah Class see by now what those two folks (whom I just spoke of) came to see: that the situation is quite the opposite. The Bible is a challenging work to decipher and to apply to our lives and far too often it is misunderstood and thus its principles are misapplied or even dismissed. This happens because rather than do the difficult digging that is necessary to peel back the layers to get down to its molten core, many Believers have (without knowing it) turned to Scripture translations and studies that were formulated to reduce it to a Junior High School level of reading and vocabulary proficiency, thus promoting a Junior High School level of understanding.

Anyone who has ever dealt with a Junior High School-er knows that while that eager 13 year old mind does, by now, have some notion of life's realities and principles, their depth and breadth of understanding (bless their hearts) is woefully incomplete and full of gaping holes. The problem is that generally they are quite sure they have all the facts they need and are also supremely confident that any further information is superfluous and just a waste of their time. So offers of additional input are met with disinterest usually accompanied with looks of, "what do I need to know this stuff for, it's boring?" Thus while they seek maximum independence, in reality they need much shepherding and carefully limited freedoms in making significant decisions because the results of their decisions can represent a long term danger that they have no capacity to discern. And their inability to discern is due to lack of maturity and

knowledge that is far more limited than they think it is.

To approach the Bible with this kind of immature naivety as though the intent of its incomparable words can be comprehended without reading it from the beginning to create a foundation; or reading it as though the historical biblical settings, languages, and ways and customs of the people who lived thousands of years ago are little more than optional footnotes is more than mere error, it is dangerous for a seeker of God. Our Christian faith has been compromised from one end to the other with theological philosophies and agendas brought about by men who think (as Junior High School-ers think) that by reading only a portion of the Bible; or by skipping the first 60% and then relying only on the New Testament Gospels or some of Paul's epistles; or by standing on the carefully crafted faith doctrines of one of the literally thousands of Christian denominations, they have all the information they need to make sound decisions about both their spiritual and earthly lives and especially decisions about their relationship with the Lord. To open themselves to the actual and full Word of God, starting with His first words, is often considered to be too hard and unnecessary and will only confuse the well established set of doctrines and traditions they and their flocks are certain are right and by definition all else must be wrong. If I've heard the words once, I've heard them a hundred times: "I don't know what the Bible says but I know what I believe".

Listen to the writer of the book of Hebrews chapter 5 that speaks about what happens when a Believer refuses to advance beyond the basic understandings of God and faith but thinks that somehow this basic understanding is sufficient. ***CJB Hebrews 5:11 We have much to say about this subject, but it is hard to explain, because you have become sluggish in understanding. 12 For although by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the very first principles of God's Word all over again! You need milk, not solid food! 13 Anyone who has to drink milk is still a baby, without experience in applying the Word about righteousness. 14 But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by continuous exercise to distinguish good from evil.***

This situation that was a problem in Paul's day, remains a problem in our day, and is the same sort of situation that we are reading about in 1st Samuel; it is this disinterest and naïve immaturity and failure to strive for "***continuous exercise to distinguish good from evil***" that is the mindset of the Israelites of Samuel's era at the time when their precious Ark of the Covenant was first captured and then returned to them after 7 months in the hands of the Philistines. The Torah was now 400 years old; the 40-year wilderness journey was ancient history for these folks, just as the Pilgrims' migration from Europe to the new frontier of America is ancient history to us. Apparently the priests and Levites no longer gave much thought to those days of old or to the ancient Law of Moses given on Mt. Sinai. The Torah and the Exodus were things of the past, irrelevant as far they were concerned, and they were satisfied to believe whatever they believed.

Who among us today reads the documents and writings from the Pilgrim era or studies books penned only a few decades later telling of the deprivation and heroic efforts of these Believers to survive and start a colony in a place of freedom where they were no longer literally coerced into public observance of state-mandated religious traditions and customs? Part of the reason we don't go back and look at these writings is because even though the language of the

Pilgrims was English, the spelling, the way the alphabet characters were formed, the sentence structure, and even the somewhat peculiar words of those writings make studying them tedious and even frustrating. We have to untangle and go through the trouble to figure out what those words meant to them in the 1600's, because we certainly don't claim that we can directly apply the experiences of their culture and society to 21st century America. So why do most mainstream Believers think we can merely lift these bible characters and scripture writers out of their day and time and set them into our living rooms, clothe them in Levis and Nikes, hand them a Ham and Cheese quiche and somehow this is all that's needed to harmonize their ancient Middle Eastern, Hebrew culture and thoughts with our 21st century Western, English based culture and thoughts?

For those among us today that don't care for American history or see any relevance to knowing about our Pilgrim faith forefathers or wish to put in the effort to discover it, our ill-informed conclusions may at times put us on the wrong side of truth and reality; on the other hand such mistaken beliefs will generally have little effect on our lives. But when dealing with the Word of God; when dealing with the divine truth and commands and principles sent down to us from Heaven, it's an entirely different matter. For the people of Beit-Shemesh, the residents of the Israelite border town where the tumor-ridden Philistines sent that cart with the Ark of God aboard, much to their shock it turned out that their willful ignorance of, and cavalier attitude towards, the Torah proved to be fatal.

We ended last time as the Ark of God arrived at Beit-Shemesh, a Levite village, and there the joyful residents grabbed the Ark, set it on a prominent rock, lit a fire and as a sacrifice burned up the two cows that brought the Ark to them. They celebrated and shouted heartfelt praises to God. And the response from the Lord was to immediately strike 70 of them dead.

It was a simple matter, actually; these Levites touched what was especially holy and not to be touched and looked upon what was especially holy and thus not to be looked upon. But you wouldn't know that if you didn't read the Numbers scroll and it seems that they did not or, just as likely, thought that time had eroded its relevance. Only a specific clan of Levites and certain designated Priests could handle the Ark (or even lay eyes on it); and at least 70 who weren't of the proper God-authorized Levite families paid no heed and went ahead with their celebrating as though somehow God's Law didn't apply to them or the situation, and it cost them their lives. Did they not know the Law on this matter? While I can't be 100% for sure, I'd say the answer is probably not

We have learned that since before the time of the first **Shophet**, the first Judge of Israel (Othniel), the Levitical Priesthood was becoming careless, self-serving and corrupt; they were setting aside the purity of God's ordained ways for ones they invented and preferred and somehow must have expected the Lord to accept their ways over His. They mixed a bit of Yehoveh worship with the Laws of Moses, added a little of their comfortable old Egyptian practices and then some Canaanite religion (to make their new neighbors feel good towards them), and the Hebrews felt very good and righteous about it all. The further we moved into the book of Judges the less flattering picture was painted of the Israelite priesthood until we reach this point in 1st Samuel when, for all practical purposes, the priesthood no longer functioned. Samuel, who seems to have come from a Levite (but not a priestly) family line, was now the

highest religious authority in Israel. By the ordinances of the Law he should not have been awarded such a position. Eli the High Priest (Samuel's master) was dead and we don't hear anything about his replacement in these passages. There is no mention of a Tabernacle or of an official location of the Altar of Burnt Offering to where all Israelites should come to sacrifice and bring their offerings.

These few surviving Levites at Beit-Shemesh didn't really understand WHY God killed their Levite brothers, nor exactly what they ought to do with the Ark (but they now understood that it was dangerous). In fact (in light of what just befell them) they asked, rhetorically, "who, then, was authorized to attend to the Ark?" They didn't know and yet they're supposed to be Israel's spiritual advisors and religious experts. Why didn't they know? Because they could not bother to inquire about God's Word and instead they substituted manmade rituals and rules and principles, along with good intentions, that seemed lovely and right in their own minds. That's fine for pagans, but it is disaster for God's Redeemed of any age or era and especially for those designated as His priests.

Apparently at the confluence of the territorial boundaries of Judah, Dan and Benjamin there was a remote hilltop village that was an ancient and known cult site where some Levite Priests now lived (very possibly some were refugees from Shiloh). In response to a desperate message sent by the residents of Beit-Shemesh some of the priests of Kiryat-Ye'arim came down to rescue the Ark from the people of Beit-Shemesh (it appears they rescued the people from the Ark as well). A priest named Avinadav appointed his son Ela'zar to be the Ark's attendant and the Ark of the Covenant would now rest inside some type of tent or room in this hilltop village of Levite priests (Kiryat-Ye'arim) more or less indefinitely. "Indefinitely" turned out to be until King David's time.

Let's re-read 1st Samuel chapter 7.

RE-READ 1ST SAMUEL CHAPTER 7 all

We immediately learn that 20 years passed from when the Ark of the Covenant was sent to Kiryat-Ye'arim and this call of Samuel (in verse 3) to all Israel to return to God and leave behind their apostate ways. Shiloh, which was the designated worship center for the 12 tribes since shortly after Joshua led Israel's army across the Jordan, has become irrelevant and no mention is made of whether the Tabernacle was even in use any longer. It's likely it was destroyed and abandoned. So what is being used as God's dwelling place on earth? What is housing the Ark of the Covenant? Where are the Menorah and the Altar of Incense and the Table of Shewbread? There is later mention that at the time of Saul there were priests and some sort of sanctuary at Nob, but what exactly was there is very hard to tell. It is highly improbable that the Tabernacle was moved from Shiloh to Nob because the Tabernacle had been built on to and modified and repaired so many times since its inception over 400 years earlier. Besides whatever passed for the Tabernacle at Shiloh by the time of Samuel would not have contained much, if any, of the original fabrics and wood so whatever was constructed at Nob would have been new.

We learn this bit of information later on in 2nd Samuel: ***JB 2 Samuel 6:3 They set the ark of***

God on a new cart and brought it out of the house of Avinadav on the hill, with 'Uzah and Achyo, the sons of Avinadav, driving the new cart.

It's obvious that the "hill" is Kiryat-Ye'arim and so it seems as though the Ark was kept in a room at the family home of Avinadav until King David confiscated it. And if that's the case, then it must be that the other furnishings of the Tabernacle had been sent somewhere else, probably at least some of them located at Nob because for a short time it became called "the priestly city" and David went there to consult with the High Priest. It's kind of odd, though, that if Nob had been the universally recognized holy place for Israel that the key element of the Hebrew sanctuary, the Ark of the Covenant, was kept somewhere else. What in the world was the High Priest doing presiding over a so-called "sanctuary" that was absent the Ark of God?

The point is that until David became King and sent for the Ark and established a whole new sanctuary in Jerusalem, several decades passed where some kind of contrived system of Hebrew holy sites, and sanctuaries, and altar locations existed as the 12 tribes couldn't agree on much of anything and the Levites seemed to have little to no power to force their will upon the tribes. The Law of Moses existed in name only for Israel.

Let's back up one verse to verse 2; there our CJB says that, "the people of Israel yearned for Adonai". Many versions will say the people of Israel "lamented" or "mourned" for God, and that is a decidedly poor translation. The Hebrew phrase is ***naha ahare***, and the sense of it is that the people were inwardly feeling that Yehoveh was not with them, and that there was a break in their relationship, and that Israel's religious system had become empty and spiritless and so they had developed a deep desire for God. The key word is feeling, an emotion. Samuel was well aware of the trend of the Israelites towards wanting to recover that which was missing, but they didn't really seem to know how to get there from here. So Samuel addressed Israel as a whole congregation and said that the next step (since they were desiring God at least on an emotional level) was to do away with the foreign gods that had become part of their everyday lives and serve Yehoveh alone.

I could spend the entire rest of our time talking about this passage and feel no guilt over it (but I won't). However I can't let this pass without commenting at some length. Over a period of years the people of Israel were beginning to feel the distance between them and God; they could inwardly sense that they were isolated in some way from Yehoveh. I doubt they could have put it into words, and they apparently didn't know how to move this beyond a sense of longing, a mere emotion. But Samuel, God's prophet, said that IF they really wanted to repair the relationship with their God then two things was of immediate importance: they had to take physical action AND they had to take mental action.

Take a pen or pencil and in verse 3 where it says, "if with all your HEART", and cross out heart and put "mind". Most of you know, but for those who are new to Torah Class, that in ancient times (the entire bible era, Old and New Testament) the heart was thought to be the center of conscious thought. The heart was more or less seen then as how we today think of the brain. But due to the later Greek and Roman influences, the heart (in Western culture at least) came to be a metaphorical association with feelings, emotions. In the bible the heart has nothing to do with emotions, it means "mind".

So what we see is that the people of Israel were *naha ahare*, having an emotional desire for God and all the shalom that such a relationship brought with it. But Samuel was telling them that in order to achieve that which they felt; they had to move beyond only the emotion of it and set their minds, their wills, towards the goal. But even this still involved only a passive intent; what was critical was to set their emotions and wills into action. And the action was to physically remove the foreign god idols and pagan sanctuaries from their midst and have only worship centers that dealt with Yehoveh.

Folks, our Messianic Synagogues and churches (especially) tend to have a large portion of permanent “seekers” as their congregations. People who always FEEL the need for God, but do not have the will (their minds have not been set) to move forward towards God and make a firm commitment. And even more, they will not take the physical action of changing elements of their earthly lives that by definition are roadblocks to harmony with Yehoveh. They will not leave an adulterous relationship. They will not stop cheating people, or stealing from people, or take serious steps to remove themselves from the drug or alcohol culture. They will not dedicate time and energy to learn God’s Word, or fellowship with His people and be mentored, or serve in ministry. They will not give up harmful things in their life that are completely incompatible with the things of God like sleeping around, or homosexuality, or absolute immersion in the love of money and wealth and power.

Emotions are part of who we are, and God created emotions. Emotions are valid and necessary. But emotions are the lowest, not the highest, level of our relationship with the Lord. From low to high, the least earthly expression of our love of God is emotion, the next up the scale is an intellectual commitment (a commitment of our will), but the highest earthly expression is to act and do the Word of God. To LIVE out the Word of God is the goal, not to FEEL it. Of course it goes without saying that none of this is possible without the Lord filling us with faith and a spiritual change occurs. But from a tangible point of view, the hierarchy of commitment I laid out for you is true and it is the one that Samuel is speaking of here in chapter 7.

But notice something else here as well that plagues every one us who call on His holy name; something that is subtle yet vexing and plays an enormous role in our lives. It is that the issue the Israelites and Samuel were dealing with was NOT that they had stopped believing in Yehoveh the God of Israel even during their darkest times. They had not renounced Moses and the Law. They did not deny the holiness and righteousness of the Lord. Rather what they did was to allow impurity to creep in; they allowed things of the world to pollute their relationship with the Creator and to twist it until like the proverbial frog in the kettle, they were almost dead in the Lord but it happened so subtly that it was almost unnoticeable.

How, we ask today, can these weak, wicked Hebrews **not** notice that it is wrong to mix in the paganism of having Baal and Ashtoreth idols in their homes, and observing some of the pagan holidays (even though they went by Hebrew names), and that if they compared the Law of Moses with how they were living their lives it was at opposite ends of the pole? But we ask that question with blindfolds firmly affixed to our own eyes, plugs stuffed in our ears, and ready rationalizations to explain away our paganizing of Christianity that would have made any of those ancient Hebrews green with envy. Every time I get on this subject and use some well

known examples, I immediately get people running up to the podium explaining that while indeed they understand that what they do might SEEM to be pagan, and possibly did have pagan beginnings, they do it in God's name. Or, they don't actually worship this or that, it's just a symbol and besides non-Believers are always asking them about it so it gives them a means to create a relationship. Or that it's just for fun and they're able to separate it from actual religious observance. What's so ironic is that I don't have to give you even one illustration or example because each and every one of you know the sorts of things I'm speaking about and you have at least one or two in mind right now, because they're your favorite and you aren't about to give it up. Well, then you better than anyone ought to understand and sympathize with these Israelites that Samuel is speaking to because it is precisely the same situation and they always employed precisely your argument. Problem is, God didn't buy it then and He doesn't buy it now.

Again, remember: these people who were eventually exiled from the land primarily for their idolatry had NOT renounced God, nor given up worship of Him; rather they merely added "fun" or "useful" elements of a pagan system to God's pure and holy system. So don't even remotely think that idolatry and Christianity are mutually exclusive; that somehow if you feel your heart is towards God that anything you might do where your intent is to honor Him or just to have fun or be in tune with your neighbors and the rest of your family that it couldn't possibly be wrong, or idolatry. Because in reality it almost certainly is and you know it, which is why you defend it so vigorously.

Another element of this story for us to notice is that the God-pattern of living in harmony with God, then apostasy, then oppression, then repentance, and finally deliverance is again at play. As we pick up chapter 7, the Israelites were in the repentance stage of this particular cycle. And they finally determined with their emotions, their minds, and now their actions to banish idolatry from their lives and serve only God.

Now that the people were living and behaving more like God's people ought to, Samuel ordered that all Israel was to come together at a place called Mizpah (which means watchtower) and there they performed some symbolic ceremonies and made a communal and public expression of confession before Yehoveh. It was here, and at this moment, that Samuel's career as a Shofet of Israel was seen as commencing.

It is interesting that Samuel said that at Mizpah he would "pray" for the people. Samuel was acting as a sort of Mediator or High Priest, although officially he was neither. Officially he was a prophet. However a prophet was God's tool on earth and they were often a jack of all trades for the Lord. None, though, were given the vast range of duties as was Samuel. This is why bible scholars sometimes have a hard time settling on a label for Samuel; some will include him in the list of Judges of Israel, and others don't because he was so much more than a Judge and also because he operated on a nation wide basis rather than merely regional or on behalf of a single tribe, which was more the norm for a **Shophet**

Now in verse 6 we find a ceremony performed that has tantalized and confused scholars for centuries; water was drawn and poured out on the ground before Yehoveh. And in concert with that the people fasted and made a public confession of sins. The issue is, was this some

specially concocted ceremony (probably designed by Samuel)? Or was this something more familiar? It is most typical (and I think many of your bibles will contain comments or footnotes) that explain that drawing up water and pouring it on the ground is symbolic of emptying ones soul of guilt and ridding oneself of it. In other words, repentance. And while there is undoubtedly repentance going on here, for me there is another solution that is obvious.

Another intriguing question is: what was the purpose of calling the whole congregation of God to Mizpah? I mean, this is a huge deal. This is no small thing to ask people to leave their homes, fields, and flocks and for some to journey several days to gather together. Such an occasion was very unusual. The typical answer comes from what happens next; that is, the Philistines come to do battle. So the usual solution is that Samuel was calling the warriors of Israel to gather for battle, and at the same time to properly seek God before the first arrow was shot in anger. I'm in the minority but I disagree with this assessment as there is a much more logical solution that fits the context.

Three times per year (according to the Law) there were to be God-ordained gatherings of the Israelites to one place: the gatherings for the feasts of Unleavened Bread, Shavuot, and Sukkot. Of course there are 4 more biblical feasts but these were not pilgrimage festivals. Of the 7 only one of them made a water libation ceremony its centerpiece: the Feast of Tabernacles, Sukkot. Sukkot was a fall feast; actually it was the last of 3 fall feasts consisting of Yom Kippur, Yom Teruah, and Sukkot. These were held within a 15 day time span.

Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) was an especially somber festival day and it often involved fasting, prayer, and confession. When we read of Israel being called to Mizpah and of a water libation ceremony, fasting, prayer, and confession I cannot imagine that this was anything else but the Israelites celebrating the 3 fall feasts in some fashion or another.

Further, since Shiloh was defunct and there was no single established holy place for Israel to make pilgrimage for these feasts (in order to be obedient to God's Torah requirements), Mizpah was the next most logical choice. Mizpah was a long recognized place for Israel to gather for religious reasons. We find it used in Judges 20 -21 (hundreds of years earlier) for the same purpose of being a meeting place for a holy convocation of Israel. In a few more chapters (1st Samuel 10) it will occur again. Many centuries later we're told in 1st Maccabees 3 that it was still considered as a traditional (though not official) gathering place for special holy convocations of God's people.

Thus in verse 7 when we read that the Philistines heard about this grand gathering in Mizpah, they reacted by mustering their powerful army to march against Israel. And in verse 8 when the Israelites heard that the Philistines were coming they were afraid. Again this hardly fits a scenario whereby the Israelites (at Samuel's behest) were gathered together at Mizpah for the express purpose of going to war against the Philistines. No; they were at Mizpah to celebrate the fall festivals not to fight. The Philistines who still felt that they lorded over the Israelites saw this gathering as an unlawful and threatening assembly in direct affront to their authority, and so they weren't about to let it go by.

Samuel offered a young lamb to the Lord as a plea for His help to ward off the Philistines.

While Israel was praying and sacrificing the Philistines crossed over into Israelite territory but the battle the Philistines sought and the Israelites feared never took place. Instead we're told in verse 10 that the Lord God thundered over the Philistines, put them into a panic, and they ran for their lives. The Lord "thundering" carries with it several aspects and so it leaves some scholars scratching their heads and wondering just how literally or figuratively to take this. The Lord thundering in Heaven usually precedes His acting in wrath on earth. Thus when we read of thunder in Heaven or the Lord thundering it is symbolic imagery of the Lord expressing His anger in Heaven and somebody better watch out below! Here it is likely that His thundering was not only in Heaven but also in the heavens. In other words it could have been the scariest noise (something like thunder) imaginable that sent these battle hardened Philistines running off in a panic. But the panic was also supernatural in nature and we see these occasionally in the bible where the Lord "panics" the enemy. Sometimes there is a physical phenomenon that has been supernaturally ordered that causes the panic, but at other times it is that the Lord instills an overwhelming terror into the enemy and they cower and/or flee in horror, virtually unable to control themselves. Some combination of the two seems to be happening here.

The men of Israel chased down these now disorganized companies of Philistine soldiers who were paralyzed with fear and slew them. The Lord balances things out in His time and His way. At essentially the same place that some years earlier the Israelites were slaughtered in battle and lost the Ark of the Covenant to the Philistines, now Israel was victorious and the Philistines suffered a terrible and long lasting defeat. The first time Israel gathered for battle and only later decided to get the Lord to side with them; He didn't. This time they gathered for prayer and repentance and peace and the Lord went ahead of them and annihilated the enemy and all Israel had to do was mop up. I think there's a lesson here, don't you?

We'll continue with chapter 7 next time.