

I Samuel

Lesson 5 - Chapter 2 Continued

I sure hope you are ready for a bit of a tough lesson and a little frank talk today. This is one of those lessons that makes me a little nervous but at the same time it needs to be addressed. Open your Bibles to 1st Samuel chapter 2. Time doesn't permit me to completely re-read versus 1 –10, that section of the Tanach that is titled Hannah's Prayer or Hannah's Song. So I just want you to silently and quickly take about 15 seconds to skim over the first 10 verses to get your bearings.

Notice that this Psalm is mostly a series of couplets that explains God's activity on earth, and the means by which He balances the scales of divine justice. These couplets often used as a method that literary-types call merism as a means to get their point across. For instance, we are told that God kills and He makes alive. God sends people down to the grave and He raises them up from the grave. The idea is that we have two outer boundaries of human existence (life and death) and that God actively controls both of these and everything that lies in between. This eloquent Psalm of gratitude and deliverance that poured out from the depths of Hannah's soul was the result of the once-barren Hannah miraculously conceiving and giving birth to a son, Samuel (**Sh'mu'el** in Hebrew). We studied this at length last week and I'm afraid if you missed that lesson you will be at a bit of a disadvantage this week.

Last week I gave you the all-important context for framing these passages, and also pointed out that this Psalm not only glorified God for His mercies towards Hannah but also very effectively summarized several of Yehoveh's fundamental and eternal characteristics, and its those fundamental characteristics that will play a large role in today's class.

I hope you can recall that context I'm speaking of because I'm going to take us on a significant detour at this time to some well-known teachings in the New Testament that bear the identical context. Yet almost universally that critical context is either not defined when these Old or New Testament passages are taught or it is erroneously defined and thus a terribly important principle for the well being of the individual Believer (and Messiah's church in general) is lost.

Turn now to the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation. We are going to read extensively; in fact we're going to read the first 3 chapters in their entirety. This section is usually called the Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia. I don't think I need to convince you that these 7 congregations were (in John's day) actual Messianic assemblies (churches) that existed, but at the same time it is important that we bear in mind that those 7 letters form a prophetic and general message to the church and is representative of all the congregations of Christ going by whatever name they are known by. And while these admonitions are pertinent to all Believers at all times in every age, they bear extraordinary significance as the time of the

return of Yeshua approaches (which is where we are now in history, thus the reason for this detour).

After we finish reading, I'll restate the context for understanding these verses, but for those who retain a good grasp of what we discussed last time you will have a head start.

READ REVELATION CHAPTERS 1, 2, 3 all

Here comes the crux of today's lesson. Most of us have been well-taught (and correctly so) by Pastors, prophecy experts and Bible teachers that the crux of the matter that Messiah is addressing in His letters to the 7 churches follows each time the words, "**And to him who overcomes....**", or as in the CJB, "**And to him winning the victory**" are spoken. Thus since we have 7 different letters to 7 different churches, that common phrase about the vital matter of "overcoming" is repeated in each letter and then followed by what it is that the Believer will receive as an eternal reward IF he or she overcomes. In other words the format is that FIRST we have a list of complaints and comments by Messiah Jesus, the founder and head of the Church, along with a warning that those who belong to these congregations are in grave spiritual danger; this is followed with a statement of what it is that those who DO overcome this grave spiritual danger will receive as their just reward (as opposed to who do NOT overcome). And at the heart of each requirement is a significant change in spiritual attitude, doctrine, and behavior.

So, beginning with the letter to the church at Ephesus and ending with the church at Laodicea, we have these 7 rewards pronounced for the over-coming Believer:

1. The right to eat from the Tree of Life (meaning the receiving of eternal life).
2. They will not be harmed by (they will avoid) the 2nd death, which is referring to the Eternal Lake of Fire that comes at the final judgment for all mankind.
3. They will be given guaranteed access to the banquet of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (the new manna), with the white stone as their entry ticket and each stone personalized with a new secret name that no one else will have or know.
4. The victors shall be given authority to rule over nations.
5. They will be given white robes indicating a condition of absolute purity, ritual cleanliness, and personally introduced one at a time to the Father Creator, and be given a personal guarantee of living forever in the presence of God.
6. The one who overcomes will be able to serve at the Temple of God and be permitted to live in the New Jerusalem.
7. They will be allowed to sit with Christ on His throne (so intimate will be the relationship) and share His authority.

Now if you are able to imagine and visualize all this I applaud you because it is way too much for my mind to fully grasp. But here's the thing that is clear and not hard to understand: what these 7 rewards describe is what that thing that we all hope for (living eternally with God) amounts to. But what it also means is that many who are part of these 7 representative congregations but who refuse to heed the Messiah's warnings, open their eyes, and change their ways will NOT live eternally with God because they did NOT overcome. Please

understand: this is NOT about some church members receiving “jewels in their crowns” and others just barely squeezing in to heaven (so to speak). This is about eternal life for some and NO eternal life for others, all of whom were seemingly satisfied that they had already won that victory and the matter was settled.

Let's go back to our context so that we can see what this has to do with us, His Believers in the modern age. I told you last week that Hannah's Prayer ONLY concerned God's redeemed people. There is no reference to pagans, no comparison to the heathen, no contrast with non-followers of the God of Israel. Thus in Hannah's Prayer those who are killed by God were equally as much a part of God's redeemed people Israel, as those who were made alive by God. A good example of this is the Serpent on the Pole matter during the Wilderness Journey when thousands of Israelites were killed by the Lord, but thousands more were healed by the Lord. Hannah's Song speaks of those who were wealthy but suddenly were brought low as equally a part of Israel as those who were poor but became exalted. Those who were well-fed and had plenty to eat but now had to fight for a crumb of bread were part of the redeemed congregation of God, and those who were hungry but now had an abundance were also part of the redeemed congregation of God, and so on. Thus Hannah's Song is only speaking about the relationship Yehoveh has with His own people and has nothing to do with those who don't belong to Him. Do you hear that? This is another key to today's lesson so hold that firmly at the front of your minds.

Coming back to Revelation, the message of Revelation chapters 1–3 is in the same mold as Hannah's Song because it ONLY concerns God's people; His Believers, His followers. This series of 7 messages only concerns Israel and those spiritually joined to Israel by means of trusting God's Messiah. The 7 letters of Revelation are addressed strictly to the body of Believers, not to others (not to pagans or even what today we call “seekers”). And by the way, do not be confused: a “seeker” is not someone who is midway between a pagan and a Believer. They are non-Believers as you can only believe or not believe, there is no hybrid of the two states.

However what is usually assumed (and often flatly stated) when Revelation 1 –3 is taught is that these letters present a contrast between the Church and the world; that the challenge set down by Jesus is for the Believer to overcome the increasingly wicked ways of the unbelieving world in order for His followers to achieve victory and gain the rewards He has promised. Put another way: the dynamic is usually set up as the church at large as the overcomers who get rewards, and pagans at large as those who have not over come and so get the shaft. I'm here to tell you that this is not so! That kind of interpretation completely defies the obvious context and plain reading of the passages and misses the point. Rather this is about the dynamics of what goes on WITHIN the walls of the organized, institutional Church (and when I say “church” I mean it as a common term that indicates all aspects of Christian or Messianic activity). These warnings from Christ are all about the individual Believer overcoming the false doctrines, the peer pressure, the political correctness, the bad teaching, the watering-down of the Gospel to merely a social and prosperity formula, and the herd mentality of the organized fellowships of Believers (that we commonly call Churches or denominations). Like Hannah's prayer this is about God's people **only**. Does that not put these matters into a different perspective and unnerve you just a bit?

See, this is not a situation whereby Jesus is perfecting His Church or quibbling over optional items in order to spur us on to greater ministry. Rather He is dividing and separating true Believers from those who claim to be (and are certain that they are) part of His Church, but are not in His eyes. This is separating the sheep from the goats, so to speak.

In Hannah's day the institution of the Priesthood had become a dysfunctional Ponzi scheme that no longer served any real divine or spiritual purpose (it was an institution that spoke of God constantly and used all of His symbols, but had long ago stopped serving or obeying Him). In Revelation we find a parallel situation, so these 7 letters are about the priesthood of Believers (Christians, Messianics), many who have been co-opted by the **institution** of the church (a manmade institution merely purporting to be God made), and swayed by the trappings of religion; an institution that in some cases has become dysfunctional and hardly has any real divine or spiritual purpose anymore. These letters speak of a collection of 7 congregations that at one time were on the right track but some have now (each in their own way) fallen away while others have done well and remain faithful but are under condemnation by the fallen churches for not following them into the abyss.

In Ephesus loving the Lord has become secondary and lip service, and so without Him as their guide they have been enticed into great sin and lost their way (and they are utterly unaware of it). In Smyrna they are suffering and hurting from the barbs and insults of brothers and sisters who claim to be followers of God but are not. In Pergamum they insist on doing everything in Christ's name, and to be the true standard bearers of the Christian faith, yet they have taken on the role of Bil'am who did everything he could to curse and destroy Israel by means of enticing Israel to forget their unique heritage and instead adopt the ways of gentiles. In Thyatira the congregation has taken to following church members who hold themselves up as pious prophets who get special messages from God, but these self appointed prophets are actually leading the sheep into sexual immorality and sin. In Sardis the congregation is large, vibrant, and well known and this makes them think they must be in harmony with God, but Yeshua says that it's all a mirage; they are actually dead men walking! In Philadelphia Yeshua says He knows that they are small in size, with little influence in the realm of the institutional church (barely a blip on the radar screen) but that He is going to send folks to them from some of these other more visible but apostate churches so that a least a few can come and learn truth, live faithfully, and be saved away from what is going to happen to those who stubbornly remain in their apostate congregations. Finally, at Laodicea, the issue is that the people have become passive. Their commitment to the Lord amounts to showing up at congregational meetings. While on the one hand they haven't openly renounced their faith, on the other they have no enthusiasm for their Savior, no sense of obligation to serve Him or obey Him or to grow in Him or help to expand His Kingdom.

CJB Matthew 7:22 On that Day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord! Didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we expel demons in your name? Didn't we perform many miracles in your name?' 23 Then I will tell them to their faces, 'I never knew you! Get away from me, you workers of lawlessness!'

Which one of these 7 representative congregations are we attached to as individuals? Which one of these best describes the denomination where we worship and fellowship? Which one are our friends and families associated with? While no man can truly know another man's

heart, we are told in God's Word that we can tell something about a person or a group (including, to a degree, their spiritual condition) by their fruit.

I think it's reasonable to look to some of our greatest and most faithful church leaders and to at least take into account their view on the general condition of the body of Believers and see if it fits with what Yeshua says in Revelation. Several years ago during a TV interview with Larry King, Billy Graham stated that he has come to the sad conclusion that AT BEST probably no more than 30% of folks that attend church regularly are actually saved. Billy Graham's organization also followed up on the hundreds of thousands (perhaps millions) who came forward over the years at his Crusades and found that fewer than 2% demonstrated any evidence of continuing in the faith. I imagine that really doesn't shock many of you; you've probably looked around and suspected the same even if you didn't want to believe it or say it out loud.

Does that mean, then, that we have churches today that are 70% seekers and only 30% who profess to be Christians? Heavens no! It means exactly what we just read in Revelation and I just quoted from Matthew; that most who think that they've received their fire insurance actually bought a phony policy. How is that possible? Well that exact situation has really kind of been the point of everything that has followed and flowed from the Book of Exodus onward in God's Word when by means of His Laws and Commands the Lord defined just who He is and what He expects from those who want fellowship with Him. And what we learn is that when we put aside any aspect of His written Word, when we deny any part of His unchanging and indivisible nature and character, we stop acknowledging the true God and begin worshipping a non-existent god that is made in our image of what god ought to be. We rely on a false-god whom we have conjured up and too many of our religious institutions uphold rather than tear down. This is called idolatry.

In Hannah's day the men in charge of God's sanctuary (the Levite Priests) put away the Torah and decided to follow a system of manmade traditions, doctrines and observances that they claimed were the same thing as the Word of God (but God wasn't buying it!) In our day (and at the end of days) many men who are in charge of our Christian religious institutions have put away the Bible and decided instead to follow a pious and nice sounding system of manmade traditions, doctrines and observances that they say are the same thing as the Word of God. Well guess what: Messiah Yeshua says here that He's not buying that either!

I remember what a bombshell this reality was when it first struck me. First it scared me, and then it depressed me. Later it blessed me because I now had the knowledge to make a change and perhaps a difference. Folks, this isn't my word, this is God's warning directly taken from His Word. Yes it is hard hitting, it's sobering, and it's unsettling. This is why we took the time to read these 3 chapters fully so that not only can we see the connected parallel of the letters to the 7 churches to Hannah's Song, but also that we can feel the impact of what God is telling us in proper context and hopefully take corrective action as it applies to each of us as individuals, and as congregations of Believers. But what IS that corrective action going to look like in some cases?

Before we move on with 1st Samuel 2, I would like to read from one more place in Revelation

that answers that question. Turn to Revelation 18.

READ REVELATION 18:1 – 5

“Come out of her, My people”. As hard as it is for us to do, THIS is the prescribed corrective action for Believers who want to again stand with the Lord. Sometimes there is no choice but to walk away. The great whore of Babylon is that part of the institutional church that has become so dysfunctional that it has become the apostate church. What is an “apostate church”? It means it claims to be the church with Christ as its head. It means it calls on Jesus’ name for authority. It means it sure looks good and sounds good if you don’t look too closely. But it also means that the Lord’s laws and commands have been ditched, and the recognition of His nature exchanged, in favor of something else that is NOT God. And applying the principle of the 7 letters to the 7 churches to this passage in Revelation 18, despite Christianity’s proclivity to want to identify but ONE of the hundreds of manmade denomination as the whore of Babylon (usually it is said to be the Catholic Church) is very doubtful. This isn’t about people who belong to ONE institutional church denomination that has gone terribly astray; instead we will find this tendency towards whoring, unfaithfulness and apostasy spread throughout the earthly religious institutions generally. Certainly it is not a universal condition, and certainly many church institutions are fighting hard to stay on (or return to) a pure path.

How can I be so certain that Revelation 18 is about God’s people and not the wicked pagan world? Because God is calling out, “MY people”. “My people” (God’s people) has always been and will always be God’s true followers, not pagans and not the apostate. Even the term “whoring” (which biblically means to be unfaithful either to God or to a husband) only has meaning when applied to God’s followers. Whoring is what happens when a wife cheats on her husband. Whoring is what happens when a Believer prefers to see elements of religious or humanistic philosophy added to, or substituted for, the pure worship of Yehoveh because it pleases us or allows us to be more acceptable to our peers.

So the issue addressed in Revelation 18 is the same as in Revelation chapters 1,2 and 3: individual Believers over coming authoritative religious institutions that claim to represent the Lord on earth, but do not follow His Word nor honor His Laws and Commands. These are religious institutions that claim the Bible as their Holy Text, but then turn around and denounce the majority of it as no longer valid or relevant. These are organizations that on the one hand say that God never changes, but on the other say that some time between the books of Ezra and Matthew God traded in one set of characteristics for a newer set and thus one set of commandments for another.

The question and challenge before us all is the one that Christ set down in His 7 letters: will we take the harder road, accept our personal responsibility and overcome, or will we stay on the easier road, prefer comfort and familiarity and popularity to the truth, and in time be very surprised by the inevitable eternal consequences?

Let’s get back to 1st Samuel chapter 2.

READ 1ST SAMUEL 2:11 – 17

After dropping off the kindergarten-aged Samuel at Shiloh and entrusting him into the care of the High Priest Eli, Elkanah, Hannah and P'ninah pack up and return to their home in Ramah. **Sh'mu'el** began serving the Lord at this startlingly early age as this was the vocation his mother had dedicated him to for his lifetime.

Verse 12 begins to explain just how darkly apostate the Priesthood had become by now and Eli's sons were among the worst actors. Verse 13 gives an example of the despicable things they did starting with they're wandering around to the cooking pots of the many worshippers who came to the Tabernacle to offer their vow and thanks-offerings (the various kinds of Zevah Shelamim sacrifices) and partake in the sacred worshippers' portion of the sacrificial meat. Eli's sons would poke their specially made extra long forks into the vessels of boiling meat. Whatever became attached to their forks they kept for themselves. This smacks of the Mafioso wandering into small shops of frightened shopkeepers and helping themselves to whatever caught their eye as payment for their so-called services. This had apparently become a custom at Shiloh that was expected and accepted, and these sons of Eli don't appear to meet any resistance from the laymen who came to worship and sacrifice. In fact this dishonorable practice even had a certain spirituality falsely attached to it because the idea was that by the priests' blindly sticking their forks into the murky stew, whatever it was that became attached to their forks was God's providence and thus they only stabbed at each pot once; they accepted as God's will however much or little meat that they skewered.

Although it appears to be part of the same example, what is referred to in verse 15 is actually yet another way these 2 priests took the worshippers' food from them. When the fat portion (the best portion) of the sacrificial animal was burning up on the altar, the priest would come by and take other portions of the meat in raw form away from the worshipper, because they wanted to roast it and not eat stewed meat out of a pot. The Law was that until the fat that was offered had been completely burned up on the altar, it was not yet time for the Priests (or the worshipper) to take his portion; but the sons of Eli were too greedy to wait and when someone did protest they bullied them into submission.

Now it was bad enough that Eli's sons badly mistreated those over whom they had authority and they were supposed to be serving; but the far bigger crime was against God because they were robbing what belonged to Him and ignoring the sacred rituals He ordained in favor of their own ways. This was called in verse 17 a very great, or a very serious, sin. This is another way of saying "a high-handed" sin, referring to a type of trespass for which no atonement was available.

What made their sin particularly terrible was that as God's Priests they brought the sacrifice itself into contempt. Imagine what these Israelite worshippers thought as they watched men who were supposed to be the most godly, pious and anointed representatives of Yehoveh on earth turn these sacrifices (that were essential to the well being of each Hebrew and at the center of their harmony with the Lord) into little more than a personal food fest. These people had traveled substantial distances in difficult conditions to do as the Lord commanded; and they were met by white-robed thugs who hid behind God's holy name that they might profit

personally.

Apparently this went on for quite a long time, such this it had become usual. Where was the justice? That's what we'll see remedied next week.