

I Samuel

Lesson 11 - Chapter 7 and 8

We'll finish up 1st Samuel 7 and get a short glimpse into chapter 8 today. This section of 1st Samuel brings up deep and complex theological issues so we're going to spend all the time needed to thoroughly examine them. I ask you to keep your focus because some of what we're going to discuss will challenge the assumptions you make when reading the Bible; things that you've taken for granted. Or as Dr. Robert McGee likes to put: we're going to see just what it is that you believe you believe and see if you really do or if there is really any basis for it beyond traditions.

Last week I rattled some cages and challenged some sacred cows by asking you to examine yourself in regard to which things in your life you are hanging on to that please you, but that perhaps have no place in the life of a Believer and certainly does not please God. And I told you at the start of that lesson that by its end some of you might go to bed and have a sleepless night wrestling with this challenge, and others would simply be mad at me for pulling the covers off a deep-seated problem you'd rather not face. It doesn't surprise me that this is, of course, what happened.

Perhaps the main thrust of my previous teaching was that followers of God who (in the story of Samuel) wind up being judged for idolatry are NOT those who have renounced the God of Israel; rather the idolaters are invariably those Hebrews (who steadfastly remain Hebrews) who have permitted pagan ways to infiltrate their faith, their beliefs, their worship practices, their traditions and customs, and then finally their daily behavior. This condition that I called the "Believer in the kettle" happens over an extended period of time, and in such a stealthy manner, that we don't actually notice any change or often sense a growing danger.

We too easily distract ourselves from the real issue of idolatry by our drawing this mental picture of ancient Israelites who made a wholesale rejection of Yehoveh and instead adopted in full the Canaanite gods. Interestingly Israel also felt that idolatry was essentially conversion from Yehoveh worship to Baal worship (which they knew they hadn't done) so in the midst of their idolatry they didn't see themselves as idolatrous. In other words, from the Hebrew viewpoint as long as some acknowledgement of the Lord remained in their lives and culture, and in their rituals and conversations, the pagan ways that became intertwined with the ways of the Torah were thought to be normal and acceptable to God (anything but idolatry).

This is also the modern Church viewpoint of idolatry. Paganism at first was but a tiny and unnoticed blemish on Christianity, but over time it has metastasized and so embedded itself into our cherished customs and traditions that we either don't notice it or have decided that it's better to simply accept it and move on rather than perform radical surgery and remove it because of the disruptions it might cause in our lives and our relationships if we did. A

paganized Christianity is the new normal. So as an alternative means to put aside our guilt and concerns we have developed creative ways of rationalizing it away; from declaring that we have taken a pagan custom and attached God's name to it so that makes it holy and acceptable to the Lord; to saying that we hang on to this pagan thing because it's merely "fun", or we don't actually worship it, or that on balance it's a good thing that helps us to strike up conversation with non-Believers that might lead to their conversion.

Idolatry is a misunderstood biblical concept. Generally speaking pagans are not called idolaters (I'm speaking about the biblical use and intent of the word). Idolatry and apostasy are of similar character; both assume that the person who is committing either of these sins is a follower of the God of Israel, not a pagan. That is to say that you can't apostize from something of which you aren't already a part. You can't commit idolatry if you aren't first a believer in the imageless El Shaddai. In case that's not making sense let me illustrate this rather simply: you can't be fired if you don't first have a job. The term "fired" ONLY has meaning to a person that was employed, apostasy only has meaning to a person who has something to apostize FROM, and you can't commit idolatry unless you have already been set apart for Yehoveh and thus forbidden from having things in your life that you place on par, or above, God (whether that is false gods, pagan traditions, or some material thing whose importance overwhelms all else).

I tell you this so that you can sort of "reset" your thinking about what the Lord considers idolatry to be and so who idolaters are (as opposed to how we typically think of it), and what it was that the Israelites were doing and thinking in Samuel's era that the Lord judged them as idolaters. Once more: idolatry is NOT renunciation of God in exchange for something else; rather it is the inclusion of pagan practices (impure practices) into one's worship of God and the accompanying traditions and lifestyle that invariably comes with it. Idolatry is the illicit mixing (***sha'atnez***) that leads to confusion (***tevel***) that the Torah prohibits and warns against, and unfortunately we modern Believers have been sold of bill of manmade theological goods that says (erroneously) that since the Law is dead, illegal mixing must be dead, and therefore idolatry (except for some spiritualized ethereal concept of it) must also be dead. So when we incorporate decidedly non-scriptural pagan-based elements into our worship and holiday observances and even into the symbols we use to express our membership in the Kingdom of God, we are doing no less than what Samuel called all Israel to Mitzpah to repent from doing.

As we closed last week the Israelites were in a mopping up exercise of the Philistine army that was routed, supernaturally, by the Lord. The Lord though a combination of some kind of thundering (probably literally thunder of a level and extent that is nearly unimaginable), and by His divinely causing a feeling of overwhelming terror within the enemy soldiers, sent them fleeing in all directions. They had crossed the border into Canaan with the intent of punishing Israel for what they deemed as an unlawful assembly at Mitzpah, which they felt was a threat and an affront to their authority. But before they arrived at Mitzpah the Lord struck them.

Let's re-read a short section of chapter 7.

RE-READ 1ST SAMUEL 7: 11 – end

The Philistines were so devastated by their defeat that they ceased from excursions into Israel for quite some time and retreated deep into their own territory to lick their wounds. And the glory for this victory is awarded (rightfully) to Yehoveh for the resultant new political reality. It is memorialized with a stone monument being erected near the site of the battle from some years earlier where Israel lost 34,000 men as a sober reminder that the Lord weighs things out in His system of justice. We should envision an ancient balance scale where the scales are unfairly tipped in one direction by men's evil inclinations and selfish ambitions, but the Lord supernaturally and providentially tips the scales back in the opposite way to punish the wicked and rescue the oppressed. God reverses the fortunes of men at His will. And now that the Philistines were put into their place by divine decision, Israel enjoyed several years of relative peace, giving them the time and space needed for the coming transition from a loose confederacy of tribes to a united nation ruled by a Hebrew monarch.

But what we witness at this point in the book of 1st Samuel is also the next stage of the God-pattern that was so well established during the period of the Judges: faithfulness to God, followed by apostasy, followed by oppression of God's followers by the enemy, followed by repentance, culminating in deliverance. Israel repented at Mitzpah and so was delivered at the very place where they were oppressed and defeated by the enemy earlier. Once again the worshippers of Yehoveh lived in peace and harmony with the Lord. And the extent of the time that this shalom lasted is defined in verse 13 as, "as long as Samuel lived". Now recognize that historically, Samuel lived well into the reign of King Saul, dying only a few years before Saul died. So the military victories that we will soon see credited to King Saul early in his career (many of them over the resurgent Philistines) are to be understood within the context of God protecting Israel on account of Samuel. Not long after Samuel's death conditions in Israel once again seemed headed towards apostasy and oppression.

God's victory over the Philistines at Even-ezer was so effective that Israel even won back territory that they had lost hundreds of years earlier. The Philistine strongholds of Ekron and Gat were originally assigned to Dan and Judah, but they were never able to conquer and hold on to those places. There is some disagreement among scholars as to whether this passage is saying that Ekron and Gat marked the outer boundaries of the land Israel recovered and so Israel re-settled what lay in between; or if those cities were actually included and now Israel inhabited Ekron and Gat. There are good sound arguments both ways, so we'll just have to leave it as an unsettled matter.

Fortuitously there was also peace in this same period of time between Israel and their other archenemy in the region, the Amorites. However when we examine this in light of the geo-political realities of the times, we see that the age old adage of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", is quite applicable. The Amorites and the Philistines were bitter enemies as both sought to dominate Canaan and much of the Middle East; so when Israel subdued the Philistines it was natural that (for a time) the Amorites found themselves in the unfamiliar position of being on Israel's side. Plus since Israel no longer had a threat from Philistia that it had to monitor (they didn't have the prospects of a 2 front war facing them) they could be much more prepared and able to take on the Amorites and the Amorites understood that and so lay low for quite a while until a better opportunity arose.

Samuel was now the highest religious and secular authority over Israel. While I have said that Samuel was the first Judge or ruler since Joshua to have authority over all the tribes of Israel, I don't want to overextend the picture of Samuel's influence. All 12 tribes seemed to respect that Samuel was God's ordained prophet for them as a whole congregation, but not all the tribes and their princes and clan leaders were so ready to accept too much in the way of his absolute authority over them. Even his religious authority was muted somewhat by the remnant of a hereditary priesthood that existed at a place called Nob (and likely other places, too), and so his influence while more widespread than any other judge who came before, was not so great in all parts of Israeli occupied Canaan that he was "king-like".

In fact we see in verse 15 that on the one hand Samuel actually traveled a circuit from his home town of Ramah, to Bethel, to Gilgal, to Mizpah where he would act like a circuit court judge. But on the other hand when we look at a map we see that these 4 towns represent a rather limited area in central Canaan and so Samuel exerted much less presence and power over the tribes located in the more extreme northern and southern areas of the Promised Land.

We see in the final verse of this chapter that Sh'mu'el indeed saw himself in a religious as well as a civil role because he had an altar of sacrifice built in Ramah (his home), and that there were also altars in these other places that he frequented. I think we need to notice that by the standards of the Law of Moses and the instructions given in Deuteronomy this is a pretty peculiar set up. We have Samuel, the Levite (but non-priest), as the highest religious authority who even performs sacrifices on behalf of Israel but by all rights should not have. We also see the Samuel-authorized presence of many altars of burnt offering even though the Lord says there should be only one. And extra-biblical material, archeology and geographical reality tell us that there were many other altars scattered around Canaan used by various Israelite tribes and clans. So even though God had delivered Israel from oppression and given them shalom (for a time, anyway), Israel was hardly pure (when held to the standard of the Law) and even Samuel's behavior and his assigned duties have huge question marks hanging over them.

But this peculiar set of circumstances in Samuel's era is more understandable when we view it from the broader context of men's foibles and human affairs; this was unquestionably a period of transition for Israel and transitions are always messy things; usually confusing and often chaotic. Look no further than our present era when generally every American knows that we are in a messy, confusing and chaotic time. We know we are in a transition period, but we're not entirely certain what we're transitioning to. Goodness, even our current administration ran on the platform of change (transition to something new), and indeed that is what is happening. But just like for Samuel's time, it wasn't Samuel who CAUSED the conditions for transition, he was merely an agent of the transition. So is it in our time when our current President Obama didn't CAUSE the conditions for change that we are feeling (and some are embracing and others dreading) but he is the agent of bringing about transition. Samuel couldn't have known the outcome of all that was happening, and I guarantee you that neither do our President and Congress know the ultimate outcome of their tidal shift in direction of our nation towards a secular, one-world, ecologically driven policy.

Let's move on to chapter 8.

READ 1ST SAMUEL CHAPTER 8: 1 - 5

It's challenging for me to express all the depth and ramifications of what is happening at this point in Israel's national history and God's redemptive history. And complicating the matter is that this is another of those places in the Tanach whereby I have an important decision to make: do I simply teach you what is here, or do I take the time to also explain why what is here has such significant repercussions and how broadly it has affected Judeo-Christianity; and how in turn Judeo-Christianity has tended to treat this portion of the bible as a red-headed stepchild because of its nature.

I have also debated for some time at what point to open up this can of worms (and believe me that is not too strong of a term) and look at it in depth, and this point in 1st Samuel affords that opportunity. So after considerable thought I decided that I wanted to take the time to do my best to explain the ramifications at this point in the Old Testament even if it might seem as though we're on a major detour (but I promise you we're not).

Let me begin by saying that the difficulties posed in the books of Samuel and Kings have had much to do with bible academia's belief that a whole new approach to scriptural and theological examination was needed to account for what is written in those biblical manuscripts, and the result was a new study discipline called Literary Criticism. While Literary Criticism has an awfully high-brow sound to it, it's not at all hard to understand. All it means is that one method (of many) to study the bible and understand how it came to exist, how it was written and put together over time (and as a means to check its reliability from a scientific viewpoint), is to study the various styles of writing and the various usage of certain phrases and keywords to see if it can help us to tell if a book was written by one person, or more than one person and if it has been corrupted or redacted by yet another hand at some point. Literary critics claim to be able to answer those sorts of questions by identifying unique literary styles and grammar that can even tell us WHEN certain passages were written. Thus this is why over the last few decades a new debate has arisen in theological circles over whether some of the books of bible prophecy were actually fraudulently or disingenuously written well after the fact. In other words (for example) some literary critics claim that Isaiah prophesies the fall of Jerusalem only AFTER it happened and this is because they claim that the way the writer of Isaiah uses words and phrases indicates a later rather than earlier time that it was written. And that Isaiah the prophet was not the writer (or perhaps not the SOLE writer); only his name was used so the real writer would have instant credibility.

You can probably tell by my tone that I am more than skeptical of these literary critics whose work is by its very nature subjective and therefore there is utterly no way to prove any of it (but it is a great way to put doubt into the minds of Believers and to make a name for one's self). So basically they make these questionable claims that can neither be proved nor disproved, but they are often believed and accepted by other professors because these literary critics have the proper academic credentials and reputation. Then these claims are taught to Bible College and Seminary students and in a short time, presto! It becomes fact.

The most modern Literary Critics' view of Samuel and Kings is that two different writers (at a minimum) with two very different agendas (competing and opposite agendas, actually) wrote

these books. And that when carefully reading them, we'll see two contradictory and irreconcilable God-principles at play, and that is itself evidence of some ancient writer injecting himself (probably at the order of some king of Israel) to make sure that his viewpoint was expressed to oppose the other viewpoint. The obvious conclusion then is that the books of Samuel and Kings cannot be trusted and the foundation of that belief is that in one instance we have God despising the idea of a monarch governing Israel (a human king), but then later on the Lord reverses course and not only accepts the idea of a king but makes it the centerpiece of His plan of redemption. And the truth is that when read these books through the eyes of a modern gentile traditional evangelical Christian viewpoint that is exactly what seems to be happening.

This takes us back to something I told you quite some time ago in an introduction to our extensive study of the book of Judges. It is that despite the standard Christian stance that the book of Judges is all about God expressing His disgust at the possibility of Israel wanting a human king to rule over them, that in fact it is the opposite. It is my firm conviction that when read in context, without an agenda or doctrine driven approach, and retaining intellectual honesty, the book of Judges shows us unequivocally that God was teaching Israel of its NEED for a king. He was preparing Israel for a king, demonstrating that all of humanity could not function properly without a king (because that's how He created us), and that in the end all mankind would indeed be ruled by a king. The issue was never IF there would be a king, rather it was what KIND of a king. Would it be a typical self-serving, politically correct worldly king like all the kings that had come and gone and would arise in the future, who ruled in a way that upheld their own greatness, and imbued to them great wealth and personal benefit? Or would it be a king who expressed God's own attributes of love, truth, being a servant to His people, dealing in perfect and merciful justice based on God's laws, and leading in absolute purity?

Therefore the issue we see being batted around in Samuel and Kings is NOT whether Israel should or should not change from being a tribal confederation led by a combination of Judges and High Priests to an all-powerful sovereign monarch, but rather it was that God's people needed to be taught that if they persisted in their desire for a king who used the neighboring gentile kings as his role models, that by definition it was the wrong kind of king and all such kings will fail. Such a king would not be the kind that God would eventually install. As we go forward into Samuel and Kings this is the big picture that we need to keep in mind at all times.

OK, up 'til now has been the easy part of today's lesson. What I have to tell you next is complicated, but it needs to be told. As regards Samuel and Kings we will see both good and bad aspects of Israel having a king. In fact a number of aspects of the king issue are raised but generally only one is concentrated on by theologians. What has happened is that due to two historic major innovations within Christianity, only ONE aspect concerning the nature of a king for Israel (and God's reaction to it) can be considered as valid and all the other aspects are considered anywhere from less valid to irrelevant. I know that may sound like goobledy-gook right now but I'll try to unravel it a bit more.

The two historic innovations within Christianity that I'm speaking about are 1) the notion of orthodoxy versus heresy, and 2) the advent of modern Systematic Theology. The orthodoxy versus heresy notion arose within the Church sometime in the late 1st century to early 2nd

century, and modern Systematic Theology was created in the 18th century. I'll briefly explain both and I think you'll see why it's important for all Believers to have this information.

The orthodoxy versus heresy notion in a nutshell is this: that within the Christian religion there are a set of non-negotiable doctrines or principles (as defined by that denomination's leadership) that a member is to accept without hesitation; heresy is to question (let alone reject) one of those doctrines or principles. A person who operates firmly within the orthodoxy of their denomination or sect and doesn't stray is allowed to remain a member of that congregation in good standing. A person who questions or rejects one of those non-negotiable doctrines is branded a heretic and is usually punished or re-educated until they repent or is outright excommunicated from that congregation. Folks don't even remotely think this is a thing that was reserved for the ancient church, or for the dreadful time of the Inquisition; it is alive and well and more active than ever within the Church today on a nearly universal basis.

Here's a familiar example within Evangelical Christianity: if a certain denomination believes that the Rapture will occur at the mid-point of the Tribulation, then (depending on how adamant that denomination is on that issue), the mid-trib rapture becomes orthodoxy. If someone within that denomination comes along and challenges or rejects that view they are branded a heretic and thus are shunned by the rest of the membership or even turned out as a member. This is orthodoxy and heresy at work.

What's important to understand is that the notion of orthodoxy and heresy didn't always exist. A research project that was documented and published by Professor Daniel Boyarin of Stanford University has provided good evidence for what had been suspected for some time: that until around the time of Christ, Judaism didn't operate within the notion of orthodoxy and heresy. In other words one sect of Judaism could (and regularly did) claim that another sect was terribly wrong in their theology, but it didn't result in a demand for excommunication. If a student of Hillel violently disagreed with a student of Shammai, the accusation and threat of "if you believe such a doctrine in opposition to what I believe then you cannot claim to be a Jew" didn't occur. Judaism allowed for a continuous and wide ranging debate and dialogue on Scriptural issues and doctrinal questions. All one has to do is read the Talmud and you will find wide ranging viewpoints on practically everything about the Holy Scriptures, but no call for excommunication for the opposition. In general it remains so today in all but a few circumstances (the most notable exception being a Jew who accepts Yeshua as Messiah). So until around the time that the Christian Apostles began to stir up controversy we don't find any real evidence of Judaism embracing the concept of orthodoxy and heresy.

But in Christianity the place of orthodoxy and heresy is a mainstay in Church governance, and many of you have experienced it (or know someone who has). Beginning especially with the Roman Church, the orthodoxy/heresy issue wasn't particularly complicated to administrate. If a church authority decided you were a heretic, that was that. Often it was a rather arbitrary accusation that served some other agenda that the victim knew nothing about. But it invariably also served one major purpose: all dialogue concerning church doctrine was shut down. It was political correctness taken to the extreme. During certain periods in past centuries a conviction of heresy cost you your life. The only possible dialogue about entrenched church doctrines took place at rare ecumenical councils of the highest church leadership, behind closed doors,

and even then it was a dicey situation for the participants depending on the particular doctrine that was being discussed.

Many of us have at one time or another been part of a church or synagogue whereby we knew full well there were certain sensitivities (that electrified 3rd rail) that could not be openly (and often even privately) broached without a real possibility of retribution and rebuke. However with the advent of modern Systematic Theology, this fully accepted concept of orthodoxy and heresy in the Church found a new expression.

The Systematic Theology we know of today that is present throughout the Protestant church (and a form of it in Catholicism) was essentially Christianity's response to the threat of the European Enlightenment of the 18th century, and the radical new theories of the academic elite such as Hume, Voltaire, and Kant. These philosophers' teachings revolved around demystifying religion, taking any supernatural or miraculous element away from Judeo-Christianity, and essentially popularizing secular humanism (the belief that there is no god and that the human intellect and rational thinking was the key to mankind's progress).

It was the Enlightenment movement that elevated the Scientific Method to the ultimate of all human protocols designed to discover the truth. And basic to the Scientific Method is that someone (a scientist) theorizes possibilities and then proceeds with reproducible testing procedures of those theories that seek to prove or disprove each theory and thus arrive at the truth. Inherent in the Scientific Method is that if something can't be tangibly tested, then there can be no proof. Thus since one can't test for spirit, spirit cannot exist. If one can't tangibly test God, then there is no god. That which is not observable using our natural human faculties and senses cannot be trusted as true or even existing. Faith, then, is not scientific since it is not testable or tangible, and thus faith is but a religious word for ignorance, superstition or myth. An enlightened person cannot possibly believe in God because there is no tangible evidence concerning Him that can be reproduced in a laboratory.

Christianity took notice of this new reality because Church leadership found itself under scathing attack from educated folks who applied this rational thinking approach to long held church teachings and doctrines; and in the end Christian scholars found themselves with no evidence to prove the validity of their doctrines, and in some cases no answers to some very difficult and disturbing questions that had the effect of challenging their faith. Since they couldn't come up with a scientific test for the existence of God, they were able provide some answers to some very disturbing questions. And one of those disturbing questions (believe it or not) that tormented Christianity to no end was: whatever happened to Israel? After all, both Old and New Testaments prophesied at length about Israel's exile from the land, but also about their unmistakable return. Israel was last exiled around 70 A.D. and 17 centuries later they had not been heard from and there seemed to be utterly zero prospects for their return. Since the mystery of God was no longer acceptable, every biblical and spiritual question one could contrive demanded a firm answer. Christianity's rational answer to the glaring dilemma of what became of Israel is what we today dub Replacement Theology; God has rejected His original people and the church is the new Israel and the new Zion is wherever Christians set foot. Thus the prophecies were correct we just misunderstood who Israel was. Problem solved. But this is merely one example of this process of finding answers to ever theological question.

So the church being composed of imperfect humans did what humans do: we adapted, compromised, and tolerated the demands of the Enlightenment society. The Church (in order to be seen as “modern”) decided to present their theology systematically, in a kind of scientific format, so as to hopefully be less ridiculed by the new enlightened mindset of the European population and to fit in better with a society that was also becoming more educated and religiously diverse. And so a system to define Christianity was created whereby a number of standard groupings or categories of the major theological questions common to all Christianity were formulated. These categories go today by some fancy and esoteric names (scholars just love to use words that only they understand), but they’re really not at all difficult to grasp. I won’t give you all the categories but some are Christology (who and what is Christ); Soteriology (what is salvation and how is one saved); Eschatology (what does the future hold for Believers and how does it play out); and God (who is God and what is His nature). There are several more (usually around 10) categories and so how any given Christian religion and/or denomination answers those questions posed by those systematic categories becomes the non-negotiable faith doctrines and membership rules of that religion or denomination. The answers to those theological questions become the orthodoxy of that religion or denomination and by definition any other answers than theirs is heresy.

Whether you are a member of the Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, Baptist, Assemblies of God, Mormon, Jehovah’s Witness, Methodist, Episcopal or any other of the roughly 3000 Christian denominations in existence today. Although you may not have realized it, what you believe about any given subject or aspect about your faith is the result of those 10 or so categories of questions and answers about Christian Systematic Theology.

So now that I’ve put forth this information (and I’m nowhere done, yet, by the way) how does this affect a modern Believer, or even a modern seeker of God? It is self-evident that there is no universal consensus or agreement within Christianity as to the answers to those questions, or else we wouldn’t have 3000 denominations that generally compete with one another and often declare that many of the others are cults and not Christian at all. Instead any sort of disagreement or attempt at dialogue about Christian doctrines is often met with either, “perhaps you don’t belong as being part of us anymore” or, “you can’t call yourself a Christian if you believe differently than we believe”. That’s just another expression of the orthodoxy/heresy notion that over time was molded into Systematic Theology.

So here we are, nearly 2000 years after Messiah came to usher in a new era, and the unity He encouraged us to have in Him couldn’t be more splintered. Is this how it was supposed to be? Is there any way to turn back the clock to before there was such a thing as Systematic Theology, or back even further to before there was the notion of orthodoxy and heresy? But even more important, since there is approximately 3000 competing sets of what is supposed to be divine truth, how do we determine which is the right set? Or is there a right set?

I probably won’t be able to answer that in quite the way many of you would prefer, partly because I think the question itself is borne out of a set of assumptions that are dubious. But I think I do have a way to approach this matter and it has to do with how we read and study and perceive the holy Word of God. It involves our willingness to step outside of ourselves and our preconceived notions for a while. It involves opening ourselves to discovering some

unconscious (but ingrained) assumptions that we hold deep within us that we aren't even aware we have. These unconscious assumptions act as a filter that blocks so much of what God has for us, impedes our spiritual maturity, and at times strips away just enough so that we only get the partial story and thus not so much an erroneous as an **incomplete** truth. And we'll get into that next time as we will soon employ what we've learned into our study of Samuel.