

Let's open our Bibles tonight to 1 Samuel 6 as we continue our verse-by-verse study through the historical books. And fortunately we're in our favorite book tonight, the book of 1 Samuel.

We've mentioned to you often, and I'll mention to you again, whenever you read narrative parts of the Bible - the book of Acts and especially these historic books in the Old Testament - they are really God's report of what took place that He wants you to know about. Sometimes we cover hundreds of years in just a chapter; other times it takes four or five chapters to go through three or four months. But the lessons in narrative books are in the telling of the story. So narrative books, you've got to kind of put yourself in the midst of the story. That's how you learn. When you get to the doctrinal books and the epistles and all, well, then that's a different story. Then you've got to think things through, and they're conceptual. But, more often than not, the lessons in narrative books are just standing right where everyone else is standing. So that's why we can cover more ground and do one or two chapters sometimes, just to get through the story itself.

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel cover about 130 years of time. We start with Samuel, the last judge; also the first real prophet to the nation in the Scriptures. And then we go forward all the way through King Saul's life and almost to the end of King David's life, about 970 or so B.C. So far we've covered - and because we're close to the front, I can quickly go over it - the circumstances involved in Samuel's birth in chapter 1. He had a mom and a dad, but mom had had trouble having children for years. And every year, as they went up three times a year - for the week as good Jews - to the place at Shiloh where the ark stood, Hannah would cry out to the LORD for a child, and it just didn't seem to go anywhere. Every year she'd come with the same request. Maybe, at some point, she got tired of crying out for all of the wrong reasons - getting even with the second wife (being viewed in her community as someone that God was blessing). But whatever it was, she finally came to the place where she said, "LORD, if You'll just give me a son, I will dedicate him to You all the days of his life, to serve You." And I think that's what the LORD wanted to hear. He needed a leader; the nation was just floundering. And so, within a year Samuel was born. God had heard her prayer; that's his name. She nursed this child for three or four years, until the point where she could bring

him, if you will, to the tabernacle there in Shiloh and leave him with Eli, the high priest, so that he could learn to serve the LORD.

Chapter 2 was the story of Eli's family and that of Samuel's, if you will. Eli was a good priest, but he was a terrible father. He let his sons get away with murder. They used the place of worship as a place to gain for themselves. They took advantage of the position they'd been given in the LORD. They lived immoral lives, and Eli had done nothing about it. And so for Eli things kept getting worse. In fact, a prophet (unnamed) in chapter 2 comes to warn him. "Man, get your act together because your family's gonna take you down." Meanwhile, Samuel - 3 years old, 5 years old, 9 years old - just is growing in the ways of the LORD. He's got it all together. His parents come regularly to visit him. His mom makes him outfits, priestly outfits, and he's just lovin' the LORD and learning about the love of God. But the parents leave him with a guy who wasn't a very good parent, but they had great trust, by that time, in the LORD. So Eli was doing nothing. Meanwhile Samuel was growing in favor and in grace, no matter the conditions around him.

Chapter 3 jumped ten years forward. Samuel is now a kid of maybe 13 or 14 years old. And, for the first time, God speaks to him, and he hears a voice from the LORD. First misunderstands it for being the priest that he is working with, Eli; eventually realizes that it's the LORD. He makes himself available, and the LORD gives him a word to share. He's going to be a prophet. Here's his test. "I want you to go tell Eli what I'm going to do to his house because of his unwillingness to take care of his children, to put them in their place." And tough message to deliver for a teenager to an elderly priest that he looked up to. But he was faithful to deliver the Word of God, and God began to raise him up in the nation as a voice and a mouthpiece for the LORD. And years pass.

When we get to chapters 4 and 5, twenty-five years pass. And now Samuel is in his late thirties, early forties. Israel has been overcome by their perennial enemies at that time, the Philistines. They were the strongest people on the planet. They had the iron industry cornered. And so Israel does what it sees the world doing: they look, as they go to battle, first to their own strength, and they lose four thousand soldiers. They come back, and they say, "What did we do wrong?" and here's the brain trust, spiritually, "We need a god with us as they have gods with them." And so they went to get the ark. Now the ark was a place of meeting with God, but it's hardly God. And they treated the ark of God not as a place of meeting but as an amulet they could put around their neck. They carried it into battle, and it did not

work. Thirty thousand people were killed. The ark was stolen by the Philistines. When news came back to Eli - who was now 98 years old and he's kind of a heavy-set guy - and he hears about the ark being stolen and then his sons both being killed in battle, he falls over backward, breaks his neck. His daughter-in-law, having a child, hearing that news, dies in childbirth. We then take a switch, and we look at the Philistines who are now having a hold of the thing that they think the Israelis lost - the presence of their God - but the LORD now needs to teach the Philistines something new: that is He's the biggest, baddest God of all. And so they put Him in the house of Dagon, which was their god. It was a god of half kind of fish - had a fish body and the face and the hands of a man. The first night it was in there, Dagon fell on his face. They thought, "Accident." They put him back up. Second night, well, Dagon fell on his face again except now his hands and his head were cut off. And they thought, "Well maybe it's better we don't put that in there anymore." And so they began to march this idol (to them), this ark of God, around their five main cities of the Philistines at the time; and everywhere it went, the people began to get sick, they began to have bloody tumors, if you will, hemorrhoids is the word that is used, of all things. Lets' just say it wasn't a blessing to try to mess with Israel's God. And so eventually the concern will be, as we pick up tonight in chapter 6, "Let's get rid of this thing!"

Our lesson tonight, from chapters 6 and 7, is fairly straightforward. And you learn it from God's people themselves, who had been beaten so severely and lost the ark. They will be brought by the LORD to the same place of defeat; into the fields of defeat, they will find God's victory. And they will find it twenty years after the fact because they will now have learned that God is for real. He can be depended upon. He's not living in that ark (in terms of having that ark with them means anything). And so they will come back to the LORD and begin to look to Him.

Chapter 6:1 will tell us that the ark was seven months in the Philistine land. Chapter 7:2 will tell us that when the ark came back to Israel, it remained in the house of one family for twenty years. So there's the main twenty years of passing of time as we read these two chapters together. The nation will repent. God will hear. And, interestingly enough, Samuel, who disappeared in chapter 4:1, when they started to think about, "Let's get the ark," reappears in chapter 7 as God's mouthpiece because now the people want to hear from God. And when you want to hear from God, God'll speak to you. And if you want to walk with God, God'll walk with you. But you can also spend twenty years of your life out there gettin' beat over the head by the Philistines and losing your awareness of who God is.

So let's start in chapter 6:1. We ended, and we gave you kind of a quick overview of what got us to that point. We'll just end with chapter 5:12, where the men of all of these different Philistine cities began to cry out to the heavens because of their suffering brought on by their carrying around of the ark. "Now the ark," it says, "of the LORD was in the country of the Philistines seven months. And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners, saying, 'What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us how we should send it to its place.' So they said, 'If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty; but by all means return it to Him with a trespass offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why His hand is not removed from you.' Then they said, 'What is the trespass offering which we shall return to Him?' They answered, 'Five golden tumors and five golden rats, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines. For the same plague was on all of you and on your lords. Therefore you shall make images of your tumors and images of your rats that ravage the land, and you shall give glory to the God of Israel; perhaps He will lighten His hand from you, from your gods, and from your land. Why then do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? When He did mighty things among them, did they not let the people go, that they might depart?' "

So, it seems strange to me, and maybe to you as well, that these Philistines - I know they were idol worshippers - you don't think they're stupid. So seven months of toting this ark of God around - everywhere it went, people got sick. And then somehow it took a half a year or longer to go, "Duh, maybe we need to get rid of the thing." I don't get it. You're messing with the ark of God. You're messing with the God of the Jews. That is dull of hearing, absolutely dull. Seven months later now, though, everyone's afraid to move the thing because it has become a curse to them. So they call their religious leaders (verse 2), their diviners together for guidance. And they're not sure, but they're pretty sure, "If you're gonna return it, you should probably send it back with some expensive guilt offering, at the least, and then maybe He'll let you off the hook. We've never dealt with this God, so we have no idea. But we have some history with Him. I mean, He is the guy that dealt with the Egyptians. And once the Egyptians stepped aside, the LORD seemed to leave them alone although it almost cost them everything. So we should send back a gift, a trespass offering, and then maybe we can get out from under this." And they said, "What should we do?" And so, "Let's make images of the things that have afflicted you - the rats, the tumors" (maybe bubonic plague). "Make five of them - one for each city, one for each ruler that had been affected." There's no commentary, by the way, in chapters 5 and 4 of the ark of God going to Ashkelon

or to Gaza. There is record of it going to Ashdod and Gath and Ekron, the other three very large Philistine cities at the time. But this would tell us it went everywhere. So these guys were slow learners, not very bright. This plague that God had brought upon them, notice verse 5, had ravaged their land. So their religious leaders say, "We should give glory to the God of Israel. Maybe He'll lighten the load. Maybe He'll leave us alone and our land alone and our gods alone. For now, He's wiping us out. He's wiping us out. Acknowledge His supremacy." Which tells me that, at least for this moment, these fortune tellers are fairly filled with common sense. Whatever they're used to doing, I don't know, but I mean there's great logic in verse 6. Right? "Why should you stubbornly refuse this God that had protected and delivered Israel from the Pharaoh and Egypt of all things? And when he let them go, finally, God then backed off. But it cost them nearly everything. We should wise up, too." It is an amazing thought to me that when people see God's overwhelming power, though they know they can't resist Him, common sense wouldn't say, "I should maybe bow my knee to Him or submit myself to Him and forsake whatever powerless gods I'm holding on to and join the God of the Jews." I mean, doesn't that make sense? He's the only One that, when all is said and done in the battle, He stands; everybody else falls. Dagon has lost his head and his hands. The Philistine major cities of commerce - their leadership just in bed or worse.

I remember having someone say to me one time, a high school friend who I hadn't seen in a while, "I see what the Lord has done in your life in saving you, and it's awesome, but it's just not for me." And I thought, "Well, that's the dumbest thing you could ever say! If you see that God has changed my life, why wouldn't you want Him to change yours?" But here's the argument - this is a spiritual battle. In other words, no human sense leads anyone to the Lord. Right? It isn't the way you get to people. You have to share the Scriptures, and God has to get ahold of them. I was reading in Luke the other day about Jesus in the synagogue on the Sabbath when that man came in with the withered hand, and Jesus looked all around him at these religious people, ready to just inflict their rules upon Jesus of working on the Sabbath. And He said to the man with the withered hand, "Stretch forth your hand." And it says that he did so, and it was restored like the other. That had to be awesome to be in that service, you know? A guy you know, and he's suffering, and now he's completely well! Verse 11 of Luke 6 says this, "They were filled with rage, and they determined with one another how they might kill Jesus." ("You heal another hand, and You're dead, man.") It makes no common sense, but it makes every bit of spiritual sense.

Now, I don't know what the consensus was amongst the Philistines at this time - these idolaters, these idol worshippers - but I suspect, from what we're going to read, that some people thought this was just very much a coincidence, that, "This whole God thing is baloney. I think we should keep the ark, not give it back to them. Maybe we've just got some bad luck." And so, after the comment there in verse 6, they devise a test that should prove whether this is bad luck or they are truly dealing with a God that is more powerful than anyone else's.

So we read, in verse 7, " 'Now therefore,' " ("Here's what we're gonna do" - these are the priests and the diviners), " 'make a new cart, take two milk cows which have never been yoked, and hitch the cows to the cart; and take their calves home, away from them. Then take the ark of the LORD and set it on the cart; and put the articles of gold which you are returning to Him as a trespass offering in a chest by its side. Then send it away, and let it go. And watch: if it goes up the road to its own territory, to Beth Shemesh, then He has done us this great evil. But if not, then we shall know that it is not His hand that struck us - it happened to us by chance.' " It's just a bad deal. So, foolproof test made by these false priests. "Let's take cows that have never been yoked to anyone. Let's take their calves away so that instinct God made in every animal to take care of its young will have to kick in. Let's remove them. Let's hook them to a cart. Let's put them on the road. And let's see if they'll act by instinctive behavior or, somehow contrary to that instinctive behavior, they'll head for Beth Shemesh," which was about seven miles or so from where they were. Beth Shemesh means "house of the sun." Little Levite town, if you will, on the border. In fact, when we go to Israel every other year, we go to Beth Shemesh. It's, even today, not occupied by very many people, but it is on the outskirts, if you will. And so they want to see if they're dealing with God or they're just having a whole string of bad luck. "Let's see if God's involved," and they'll use the instinctiveness of the cow to test it.

Now understand that these Philistines - if you read about them anywhere - had seen demonic proofs over the years that their god, Dagon, could be trusted. I mean, they were vested in this guy, and they were used to the powers of the gods, but they weren't clear about how do you surrender to a bigger God? Because every one of these nations believed their god was the greatest and the baddest. They knew nothing about a God of mercy or of love; all of their gods were hateful and demanding and only loved themselves. I mean, that's the way idols work. So, that was their test.

Verse 10 tells us, "Then the men did so; they took two milk cows and hitched them to the cart, and shut up their calves at home. And they set the ark of the LORD on the cart, and the chest with the gold rats and the images of their tumors." So ridiculous. "Then the cows headed straight for the road to Beth Shemesh, and went along the highway, lowing as they went, and did not turn aside to the right hand or the left. And the lords of the Philistines went after them to the border of Beth Shemesh." So God now does this work because - I don't know if you've ever noticed, but everything God creates serves Him except for man. He's decided otherwise. But these Philistine leaders follow in unbelief. Oh, my goodness! Three miles, four miles, six miles, seven miles. They called for their calves. They lowed for their babies. But they didn't move. They didn't look left, they didn't look right, they didn't stop, they didn't hesitate. They just continued to move. Amazing. And rather than going home, praising the God of the Jews, they went home happy to have gotten rid of the dumb thing. Isn't that interesting? That's the way they responded to what God has done.

Do you remember that rich man and Lazarus, and when the rich man was sent to Hades, there in Luke 16? And he's talking with Abraham in Hades, across the great divide, and he said, "My family needs to know about this place. So if you could just send someone back to warn them, then they won't have to come here, and they won't have to make the same mistake I did." And Abraham said to him, "Look, if they're not going to listen to Moses, and they're not going to pay attention to the prophets, neither will they be persuaded even if someone would raise from the dead." In other words, the miracle won't convince them if they're not hungry to know who God is. There's no internal drive to know God.

Same thing here. These guys, they came up with a plan that should have said, "We're messing with the God of the Jews." It should have left them prostrate before Him. Instead, it doesn't do anything. These smart, God-inspired cows head directly for the Land of Promise, against their natural instinct, crying out for their young; but they were on a mission from God, and they were fulfilling the call of God upon their lives and this witness to this whole generation of Philistines.

Verse 13 tells us, "Now the people of Beth Shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley; and they lifted their eyes and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it. Then the cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and stood there; a large stone was there. So they split the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD." Poor cows. That's what you get for being

faithful, buddy. "The Levites took down the ark of the LORD and the chest that was with it, in which were the articles of gold, and put them on the large stone. Then the men of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices the same day to the LORD. So when the five lords of the Philistines had seen it, they returned to Ekron the same day." Like I said, they were just happy to get rid of it.

Verse 17, "These are the golden tumors which the Philistines returned as a trespass offering to the LORD: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron; and the golden rats, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both fortified cities and country villages, even as far as the large stone of Abel on which they set the ark of the LORD, which stone remains to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh." Living in a Levite border town as a priest would have been a dangerous place these last 300 years. It was during those years that these (especially) Philistines would come and take your crops. And so these guys were living on the edge, if you will. And because it is a Levite town, these priests should have certainly known how to handle the ark properly. This day could have been filled with great joy. God's presence returned to them, at least the symbol of His presence. The only place, by the way, that you could serve and offer sacrifice, as a nation, was where the ark of God stood. It had been gone more than half a year. It now stood in your backyard, if you will. And yet, as we read along, we realize that they still don't see the God of the ark. They still just see the ark. This is still kind of the last days of the book of Judges, where men did everything that was right in their own eyes and all. This is the same mentality that, seven months earlier, had carried this thing into battle and saw thirty-five thousand people in total get killed.

So we read, in verse 19, and it's kind of bewildering, "Then He struck the men of Beth Shemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD. He struck fifty thousand and seventy men of the people, and the people lamented because the LORD had struck the people with a great slaughter. And the men of Beth Shemesh said, 'Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God? And to whom shall it go up from us?' So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kirjath Jearim, saying, 'The Philistines have brought back the ark of the LORD; come down and take it up with you.' " Careless approach to the Holy of Holies. Now, again, it's been awhile since we were in the book of Numbers; but in several places, very clearly, even the Levites, who were assigned to carry this thing from place to place, were told to back into the place; never could look at it, had to cover it, and then back in and

carry it and then set it up. No one was to see where God was. The whole idea was God's holy, you're not. Let's learn that God's holy, and you're not. And then if we're ever going to get to the LORD, it's going to have to be through sacrifice or blood shed. Right? This is the whole setup for us to learn how God is in terms of His relationship to us. So, you couldn't look at a holy God and live, and even the priests, like I said, working around the ark were told not to look in there. Numbers 4:20, "You shall not go in to watch while the holy things are being covered, or you will die." It isn't that God didn't want people to see Him. He wants us to know Him, but He wants us to learn the lesson that, man, if we're gonna get to Him, something's going to have to be done with what separates us from Him, which is our sin, not His, obviously. Thank God for Jesus coming to make the way. In fact, Hebrews 10 is a good chapter to read about how the Lord says that God made a covenant with us to remove our sins and that there's no more need for an offering for sin; Jesus has, by His body, come and made a way for us to come boldly before His throne of grace, our High Priest. So that's the whole lesson, right here.

Now, just take for a minute, draw your attention to verse 19. It is almost impossible to think that this little town had fifty thousand people in it. In fact, if you happen to be carrying with you an NIV tonight, it should read, in this verse, that only seventy people died. Hebrew-wise, it could literally read out of the fifty thousand, seventy died; which could be a reference to all that had been killed during the time between the thirty-four thousand at the battle and then those in the Philistine lands and all, that the Hebrew expression could read, "Out of the fifty thousand gathered, seventy died." That's possible. Otherwise I can't explain it to you. I don't have an answer for you. I would say this to you, that, summarily, it means that fifty thousand had died with the ark, seventy more were added here. The lesson isn't hard to learn, and the lesson is - don't think you can approach God on your own. Right? Don't think you can stand in God's presence and live. You need a Mediator. You need an Intercessor. You need a Savior. The same lesson comes through time and time again.

Verse 20 is a pretty good question. Whoever was living there said, "How do we get rid of this thing?" It sounds like the Philistines just a couple of verses ago. "What do we do now? Who can stand before the LORD and live?" And the answer is - they recognized God's holiness, they recognized their sinfulness and that you're a dead man if you stand before Him on your own. What is that Romans 3:20 verse that says, "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight." So that's the lesson, certainly. But the fifty thousand - it has to be a

colloquial that refers to something just beyond that. And there are a couple of places, even in the book of Samuel, where the numbers don't seem to add up. So it doesn't shake my faith, mind you. It doesn't change anything. But I don't think it just seems very improbable that fifty thousand people died for a few guys that looked into the ark. But, I don't know. I do know that at Mount Sinai, when the children of Israel came out of Egypt and they, six weeks later, were camped in front of God's presence, that the LORD said to Moses, "You make sure to tell the people to stand back, or they're going to die. Don't try to come up here to see Me." Right? So, access to God in the Old Testament was not simple. I know we read it, and sometimes we get laborious and think, "Man, what do all these things mean?" But all of the sacrifices and all of the rules were meant to protect sinful man from coming into contact with a holy God without a covering; to convince us and them of God's holiness, our sinfulness. Even just the high priest could go in once a year, but he couldn't just go in. He had to offer lots of sacrifices for himself and then for the people, and then we've told you he goes in with bells on so people know he's still in there moving, and a rope on his feet in case he drops dead, done something wrong; then the next guy gets to go in. You don't want to be the next guy, I don't think.

On the other hand, whenever you see the people hungry for God and wanting to reach out to Him, God accepts the sacrifices in lieu of what He would come to do through His Son. So it isn't that God doesn't want you to come. But He does want you to learn He's holy. We call Him our Father, and that's amazing. But He's also a God of holiness. So we have to keep that in mind as well. So what is that Psalm 24? There's that Scripture (verses 3-5) that says, "Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive blessing from the LORD, and righteousness from the God of his salvation." He can get all of that. So he's the guy that gets to stand.

But, needless to say, the ark comes back. It hits town. They don't handle it very well, let's say, at all. And rather than doing things right (and, after all, they are priests), they don't handle it very well at all. And God brings His judgment to bear. So, it's kind of a sad story for sure. But that's just the way it went with these guys.

All right. Where are we at? So, anyway, the message is sent to Kirjath Jearim. The name Kirjath Jearim means "city of the forest." It still exists in Israel today;

you can go visit it. It is, indeed, in a forest. It is north of Judah. It's in the southwest corner of what was then the tribe of Benjamin's land, and they basically cried, "Get this thing out of here." Verse 1, chapter 7, "Then the men of Kirjath Jearim came and took the ark of the LORD, and brought it into the house of Abinadab on the hill, and consecrated Eleazar his son to keep the ark of the LORD. So it was that the ark remained in Kirjath Jearim a long time; it was there twenty years. And all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD." We presume, because of the text, that Abinadab and his son Eleazar were priests because the LORD had given the priests charge over the ark. It stayed there for twenty years, and they lived to tell about it. That's another pretty good indicator that they were doing the right thing. But understand that during these twenty years that passed, the nation continued on their spiritual spiral downward. In other words, God was still virtually absent from their lives. It stayed there. No one came to look for it. God's presence or His meeting place was with them again - only been gone seven months, but now it's been twenty and a half years, and still no one's showing up to go, "Man, should we maybe have a sacrifice, have a meeting?" All of these twenty years over in Shiloh, those three weeks of celebration every year, were cancelled. No one came. No one showed up. The religious calendar was all but closed. And so the ark was in country, but the country was far from God though they had the meeting place with God with them. And the people went on without them. Meanwhile, and we can read it in other places, the Philistines just continued whoopin' on the Jews. They took their cities, they subjugated their people, they stole their food. Amazingly, this defeated enemy who had sent the ark back, was still finding victory over God's people. It's an ugly picture.

The same is true in the world, I think, and the same can be true with us. We can ignore spending time with the Lord. He's near. He's available. He's overcome the enemy for us. But if we neglect Him, we just become kind of food for the defeated enemy, and the enemy begins to have victory in my life regularly rather than the Lord having victory. It can work that way.

And it worked that way here. You see, this is the narrative. Put yourself in their shoes. Why weren't they, after twenty years, on their faces again? Why didn't the whole nation come to Abinadab's house and say, "Get this thing set up, man. We gotta worship! God is with us." They didn't. Until, at some place, the people began to lament for the things of God. Look, put yourself in their shoes. Eli, the high priestly family, is gone, and any good influence Eli had is gone. Shiloh, the place of worship, was overrun. The ark - the meeting place with God - is securely

tucked away, obscurely, with virtually no one anxious to reinstate Him into the national life. The only redeeming influence that you can find in the narrative is Samuel, who's running around now preachin' and sharin' and layin' out God's Word to the people and reaching out with the Word of God; and he seems to be the only one that was trying to root God's Word into the national life. The ministry was hard, the people were not willing, and it took twenty years to get the nation to go, "Oh, we need the LORD back in our lives." We're not told anything of what happens in those twenty years in terms of what it took to get them on their face, but on their face they ended up. So we read, in verse 2 at the end, everyone now began to "lament." By the way, the word "lament" means to "follow after someone and cry out to them until you get their attention." The word "lamenting" means pay attention to me. "Hey! Hey! I'm talkin' to you!" Until they finally turn around and say, "What?!" Israel, after twenty years, had come to the place where they were finally willing to confess that there was a misery of life without God; overrun by their enemies, unable to move forward. In their heart, they began again to seek after the LORD. It was the first time in a long time. You'll read in Psalm 63:1 the people crying, "You are my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water." In Psalm 107:9, "He satisfies the longing soul, and fills the hungry soul with goodness."

So, here the people were crying out, and, interestingly enough, after all of those years, now Samuel pops up again. Old time Samuel, getting older by the minute. It won't be long before he'll be unable to see. Still around, just preaching God's Word in a nation that very rarely wanted to hear it. But you see, the minute you want to hear from God, and you want God to draw near to you, here comes Samuel. He's available again, immediately so. And I think that's pretty cool. It took a long time, but finally the people came to their senses, if you will, and began to cry out to the LORD.

We read, in verse 3, "Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, 'If you return to the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from among you, and prepare your hearts for the LORD, and serve Him only; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines.' So the children of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only." Four thousand people had died (back in chapter 4); they weren't seeking the LORD. They regrouped and got the ark, used it as an idol; thirty thousand more people died. For the next twenty years, nobody moves towards God. Until now. And Samuel steps up - the voice of reason, the voice of God - and he says to the people,

"If you are really going to go after the LORD, you've got to get rid of all your false gods," which tells you how those last twenty years have gone. "You have to separate from the world and from its ways," which tells you how they've been doing. In Isaiah 55:7, where the LORD calls you to come and walk with God, He said, "Let the wicked man forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon." But first he puts away his wicked ways. So God's Word to the nation was, "I'll be your God again. Our relationship can be restored again, but you're going to have to get rid of these things that are separating us from one another." And so the people were moved, and they were moved to do the right thing. Ashtoreth is the female counterpart to Baal. She is the goddess of fertility. She is the goddess of love and war. Her worship, just say, is perverse as you would suspect. "Get rid of that in your life! You guys are a bunch of people lookin' like the world," and "prepare your heart," (verses 3-4) "for the LORD and serve Him only." You can't serve God and mammon (Matthew 6:24). There's an old line that says, "It must be Him alone if it's going to be Him at all. Him alone if it's going to be Him at all." The relationship God wants with you and me is exclusive. That's how love works. Right? We shake our heads, and people go, "Yeah, I'm married to four women." Really? Love 'em all the same do you? "Oh, yeah." You're a knucklehead. Love demands fidelity and exclusivity, and it has to be indivisible. If you have love for two, it's not acceptable to either. And God is like that. You can't have the idol worship and then a heart for God. Now they responded right. They put away, we read in verse 4, they acted upon it, and they put it away. "Restore us O God," we read in Psalm 80:3, "cause Your face to shine upon us, and we'll be saved!" So they were ready to put away their false idols.

Verse 5, "And Samuel said, 'Gather all Israel to Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you.' So they gathered together at Mizpah, drew water, and poured it out before the LORD. And they fasted that day, and said there, 'We have sinned against the LORD.' " They repented, confessed their sins. "And Samuel judged the children of Israel at Mizpah." So, Samuel calls for a national day of commitment, gathers them together at Mizpah. The nation came in repentance. By the way, they hadn't seen a national turning to the LORD like this since the days of Moses. I mean, read back. If you've been with us, you maybe remember back. They confessed their sin, they fasted before the LORD, they put off the needs of the flesh, they marked a day to return to God, they put a line in the sand. This is towards the end of the time of the hundreds of years of judges, if you will. The term "Mizpah" means "watchtower." And having been built on a hill, Mizpah can be

seen for miles around. It really does kind of stick out on the landscape. So, as you might suspect, the Philistines, which had been hammering them, now see Israel gathered together in one place; and they seem to be excited. And so, because they are not hideable - they're up on the hill - the Philistines see this as a possible counter attack or insurgency in progress, and so they decide to organize quickly so that they can come and be proactive and take out God's people who are now an enemy that they've been able to just chew on for years now seem to actually be organized against them. And all this is happening while the people are.....they're not gathering for war, they're gathering for worship. They've come to say, "God, we're sorry, and we need to do what's right in Your eyes." This is the first real test of their commitment to the LORD, especially in light of the fact that the army they were going to face, they could watch down in the valley. They were in the valley; now they came up to the heights, and they could see the people, and they were coming in their direction. These are people that had been slaughtering them for twenty years. They hadn't come to fight. Israel had come to pray. No one was armed. This was not an insurgency. But this was the time God had planned for so that they might learn who their real strength was.

So we read, in verse 7, "Now when the Philistines heard that the children of Israel had gathered together at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the children of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines. So the children 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.' And Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. Then Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him." Imagine standing here in repentance - first time in, maybe, your life if you're 20 or 30 years old. This had never happened. "We should serve the LORD." "All right." And you go to the meeting, and all you can hear down the road is, "Here come the armies of the people that have been just hounding you for generations."

It does interest me that no sooner do you repent to the LORD and resolve in your heart to put Him first and to make concrete steps back in His direction that the enemy decides this is a good time to attack you. But that's the way it works, isn't it? Make a commitment, watch the devil go nuts. "I'm gonna start going to church during the week." "Ah, eight weeks in a row I'm workin'." Wife's sick, kids are sick, I'm sick, car broke down, flat tire. You name it..... "I'm gonna try.....get up. I'm gonna start reading my Bible in the morning." You can't get out of bed. "I've never

been so tired in all of my life." (Laughing) "We're not ignorant of his devices." Right? 2 Corinthians 2:11, "We're not ignorant of his devices."

So the enemy decides this is a good time to attack, and the response of the people in verse 8 is cool because they are really in the right spot. Now they're not saying, "Run!" or "Let's buy him off." No brash, misplaced confidence in the ark or in an army that they really don't have. So they just say to the prophet, "Could you just pray for us? Either God helps us now, or we're just dead." Which is a great attitude to have towards the enemy. He's more powerful than you, but God's far more powerful than he is.

And so notice, in verse 9, Samuel begins to pray for the people. He intercedes for them. There's a great verse in Psalm 99, which is kind of a historical overview, where it says, really quickly, "Moses and Aaron were among His priests, and Samuel was among those who called upon His name; they called upon the LORD, and He answered them" (verse 6). Samuel is marked out as a guy that, when he prayed, God would listen. And so Samuel is the intercessor. Right? He stands in the place of where the people are. When we get to chapter 12, here in a few weeks, we're going to see the people wanting a king like the world. And it angered old Samuel. He took it so personally. And God said, "No. They're not mad at you. They're rejecting Me. And you're just part of Me." But in chapter 12, he then goes to talk to the LORD, and the people again begin to suffer. And the LORD sent fire and rain that day, and the people began to really be afraid of the LORD. And even though they asked for a king, God asserted who He was again, and Samuel began to pray, and the people said to Samuel, "We've done a horrible thing. We've sinned greatly. We've asked for a king rather than serving the LORD with all of our hearts. So if you could just pray for us, that the LORD would be merciful to us." And Samuel said, "God forbid that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you. I would see it as a sin in not praying." So Samuel, although he had served these people for years - and they hadn't done very well - every time they wanted to get close to the LORD, he was willing to help them. He was willing to stand with them and encourage them along.

So the people had the right response. But you read this, and.....we place a great importance at church on prayer. We have prayer meetings during the week and in the mornings and during services. The church should go forward on its knees. That's the only way we're going to make it. Because we can plan and plot all we like,

but if God's not in it, we're wasting our time. So we want His help, don't we, and His blessing.

Well we read, in verse 10, as we continue, "Now as Samuel was offering up the burnt offering," (so in the midst of this whole thing) "the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel." Can you imagine?! You're in church, and you hear the guys outside. "But the LORD thundered with a loud thunder upon the Philistines that day, and so confused them that they were overcome before Israel. And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and drove them back as far as below Beth Car." So, the attack actually starts while the people were worshipping in their new relationship with God. That is amazing to me. The devil will not wait. You make a commitment to the Lord tonight as God speaks to you, and by the time you get home I'll bet you're gettin' wailed on. It's just the way it works. You know who the devil leaves alone? People that are doing nothing. You know, if you can be on the shelf, he's happy. He'll get ya coffee. But if you kind of step out, "I want to share, I want to serve, I want to be a part of what God's doin'," man, be careful. You're gonna get into battle. And that's all right. I mean, that's just the way it works, isn't it? But here comes the enemy. And the devil.....here's the interesting picture: the battle ground is very old. This is the same battle ground that is stained with the blood of past defeats; this is the place they lost twenty years ago. And here they find themselves face-to-face with a very old adversary that they hadn't ever been able to deal with, and they're just now starting to be acquainted again with the God that they can serve. The enemy, on the other hand, remembers they've been up this road before. They come with confidence, they come with cockiness, they come with a sense of blood. They realize there's no difficulty in battle. "The Jews have never won against us." But here's the interesting thing: these are God's people worshipping now, and the prophet is praying, and God is with them. He'll fight their battles. All they need to do is look to the LORD and then gather together the spoils, if you will, of the battle. Great picture! But you see, now they're back. Right? I love verse 10, towards the end, "But the LORD." Here they come, "But the LORD." Underline those three words. "But the LORD." It's a great verse. Here comes the enemy, "But the LORD." And the enemy comes while Samuel is offering the offering of dedication, of consecration, of complete commitment, and God just deals with the enemy. The people just are in there, worshipping. Look, you may have lost lots of battles as a Christian, but God'll help you win the war. Twenty years, thirty-four thousand soldiers have been killed, the nation has been captive by these same people for half a generation. But, on these pages, the situation and the story is

rewritten. You may have gotten beaten over the head for years with some habit or problem, but God can, in one moment, deliver you. Right? You go back to Him, and you let Him have it, and you stay there. And you use these Scriptures. You go to the Lord and say, "Just like the Philistines, Lord. I want to have victory in the fields of defeat."

Well, needless to say, it was a pretty good day. "Then Samuel took a stone" verse 12, "and set it up between Mizpah and Shen, and called its name Ebenezer, saying, 'Thus far the LORD has helped us.' " So he wants to commemorate the victory. A stone glorified no skillful leader, no brave army soldier. This stone said this: God has brought us this far. It's only a stone of remembrance to help the people to remind them of the LORD. It's what the word "Ebenezer" means - the stone of our help. So, Samuel sets up a memorial with the right motive. He wants the people to remember, "Hey, remember that day? When we were up there worshipping, and these guys surrounded us. Who gave us the victory? God has brought us this far." It's not such a bad idea to leave some Ebenezer stones along the way in your life - God brought me through this, God took me through that, God was there in this kind of time - so you don't forget how far the Lord has brought you. Good way to remember God has brought me this far.

Verse 13 tells us, "So the Philistines were subdued, and they did not come anymore into the territory of Israel. And the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. Then the cities which the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath; and Israel recovered its territory from the hands of the Philistines. Also there was peace between Israel and the Amorites. And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. He went from year to year on a circuit to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah, and judged Israel in all those places. But he always returned to Ramah, for his home was there. There he judged Israel, and there he built an altar to the LORD." So, I think once you have spiritual victory in your heart, the rest of the battles with the enemy are really downhill. Right? In other words, once you realize that God can fight your battles, and you're not having to fight, all of a sudden you take over the land. You have space between you and the enemy. By the way, this is the first time in over forty years that no Philistines are living in Israeli territory - whether they're poaching or they're encroaching. And God gave them back the lands or those things in their life that had been taken from them. You get right with God, you get to gain your land back, your life back, your sanity back, your hope back, your vigor back, your fruitfulness back. And even the lowly Amorites were made to deal peaceably; and, by the way,

they didn't get along with anyone. But if God's on the throne, these guys are out of business.

Verses 15, 16 and 17 give us the resolve of the people was continued by the faithful ministry of Samuel. Just one guy! There wasn't a church on every corner. Just one guy who was the spokesman, and he ran, man. He had a life to go running around the country, just pouring out the heart of God to the people - keeping them fired up. Which is why it's good for you to go to church. You need to stay fired up. It's easy to get lazy, isn't it? We don't need that.

Between chapters 7 and 8, thirty years pass. I'm only pointing out these years because this is the way the LORD has laid them out for us. Thirty years pass. And Israel will, after these thirty years, say to Samuel, "You're old, your sons are horrible, so we'd like to cash you in for a king." And then that whole story begins of the people having to learn from God that, just like the amulet, a king isn't going to do you any good either unless your heart is right with God. God had a plan for a king for them, by the way - both a physical king and a spiritual king. But it wasn't the guy they chose. And that was a hard lesson to learn.

So for next week, if you'll read ahead - chapters 8 and 9. I don't know if we'll do one or two, but you should be prepared. So if we get to verse 22, and we don't stop, you'll be with us. All right?

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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