**3 Sermonettes: 1 Samuel 6 selected; 1 Samuel 7:2-6; 1 Samuel 7 selected** August 27, 2017

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THREE DEVOTIONAL MEDITATIONS from 1 SAMUEL

**X. Tragedy at Besh Shemesh – Taking Sin Seriously**

 I hope that you have enjoyed reading a small part of Bible History in First Samuel. Today is the end. No, we have not reached the end of this book of the Bible, nor have we fully mined its depths, but we have reached the end of this sermon series. We started with Samuel’s parents, godly but polygamous Elkanah, and godly and dedicated Hannah. Samuel grew in the fear of the Lord in the high priest’s house. In the meanwhile the high priest Eli and his sons played the blame game, which led to the Ark of the Covenant being captured by the Philistines, the enemies of God’s people. The Lord struck the Philistines with plagues which brought them to their knees. And so we come to today’s reading in 1 Samuel 6: ***(read the text)***.

 *1 Samuel 6:1When the ark of the Lord had been in Philistine territory seven months, 2the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, “What shall we do with the ark of the Lord? Tell us how we should send it back to its place.” 3They answered, “If you return the ark of the god of Israel, do not send it away empty, but by all means send a guilt offering to him. Then you will be healed… 7“Now then, get a new cart ready, with two cows that have calved and have never been yoked. Hitch the cows to the cart, but take their calves away and pen them up. 8Take the ark of the Lord and put it on the cart, and in a chest beside it put the gold objects you are sending back to him as a guilt offering. Send it on its way, 9but keep watching it. If it goes up to its own territory, toward Beth Shemesh, then the Lord has brought this great disaster on us. But if it does not, then we will know that it was not his hand that struck us and that it happened to us by chance…” 13Now the people of Beth Shemesh were harvesting their wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they rejoiced at the sight. 14The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and there it stopped beside a large rock. The people chopped up the wood of the cart and sacrificed the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord. 15The Levites took down the ark of the Lord, together with the chest containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. On that day the people of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the Lord… 19But God struck down some of the men of Beth Shemesh, putting seventy of them to death because they had looked into the ark of the Lord. The people mourned because of the heavy blow the Lord had dealt them, 20and the men of Beth Shemesh asked, “Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God? To whom will the ark go up from here?”… 7:1So the men of Kiriath Jearim came and took up the ark of the Lord.*

 With their own people dying, the Philistines decided to send the Ark back to Israel. But they didn’t really want to. “What if all these bad things happened by chance?” they wonder. Some things we don’t want to be true, so we convince ourselves they aren’t: like squeaky brakes when we don’t have money for another car repair.

 The Philistines kind of hoped that Israel’s god wasn’t stronger than theirs. So they devised a way to return the Ark that probably wouldn’t work. They get two cows that have calves. These cows have never pulled a load in their lives. They put the Ark on the cart, then send the cows up the road pulling the cart with the calves tied up. There is no way those cows will leave their crying calves or pull together up the steep grade to Beth Shemesh. But sure enough, in verse 12, ***“The cows went straight up toward Beth Shemesh, keeping on the road and lowing all the way.”*** Which had to be a blow to the Philistines’ pride, but at least they got rid of that Ark.

 Beth Shemesh, an Israelite border town, received the Ark just as they should have. Joy in the streets, people running to see if it was true, dishes left in the sink, hoes dropped in the field. What a homecoming!

 But the joy was punctured by tragedy. In the middle of sacrifice and celebration, a few mischief makers did what they weren’t supposed to, and the celebration turned into a funeral.

 It hardly seems fair, does it? You and I would have been curious too, to open the gold covered lid and peek inside. But these people knew better. Beth Shemesh was a town of the priestly class. (More precisely, the Levites: Joshua 21:16). As such, they knew the protocol: No one was to touch the Ark. In fact, no one was supposed to even look at the Ark. (Numbers 4:20) It was supposed to remain hidden in the tabernacle, and if it ever needed to be moved, it was to be covered—always! But here at Beth Shemesh, people who knew better not only looked at the Ark and touched the Ark, they actually opened the Ark up and… God put them to death. It hadn’t been back but a few moments, and the men of Beth Shemesh went to desecrating it. So God leveled the death penalty.

 My sinful nature wants to find fault with God. But I should really be thinking what fools these people were. God had disciplined them and warned them, but they thought that sin was a small thing.

 There was a man who had the intention of leading his family in daily devotions, but somehow time always got away. Work schedules, school schedules, sports schedules, fatigue. He felt like he should be doing better, but he kept on failing. What changed it was when finally, instead of “trying to do better,” he actually went to God and repented for his sin of the spiritual neglect of his family. He admitted his real and damnable sin. Through previous weeks and months he had only counted it as a shortcoming, but when he counted it as sin and repented, God began to work in him.

 And so at Beth Shemesh, rather than accusing God of being harsh and judgmental and cruel, what we need to do is realize the seriousness of sin! We usually don’t. And sometimes pastors don’t help that. Sometimes, in an effort to spare people’s feelings, pastors soft-sell the seriousness of sin. But the lesson of Beth Shemesh is this Bible truth: *“The wages of sin is death.”* Even sins of opening boxes that we aren’t supposed to open!

 Saddest of all, in response to their self-inflicted tragedy, the people of Beth Shemesh chased the Ark of the Covenant out of their town. No confession. No faith. No trust in a forgiving God. They behave no better than the heathen. They are ill-tempered children who stomp up the stairs, slam the door, and never experience forgiveness. As long as we complain about the unfairness of our holy God, there is no forgiveness.

 On Good Friday, Jesus’ cross with a body still attached shouts out again, *“The wages of sin is death!”* Our little sins, our big sins, our sins of weakness, our sins of willfulness, our sins against the odd numbered commandments and our sins on even numbered days—no excuses, every single sin—is an act of lawlessness deserving eternal punishment.

 God has promised that all who come to him in repentance have the gift of life through the blood of Jesus Christ. May we ever be attentive to the seriousness of our sins, to avoid it or to repent of it. And should we ever feel that perhaps God has let bad things happen because of what we have done, do not accuse him, but consider this hymn verse:

*If you think of sin but lightly Nor suppose the evil great,
[At the cross] you see its nature rightly, Here its guilt may estimate.
Mark the sacrifice appointed; See who bears the awful load --
’Tis the Word, the Lord’s Anointed, Son of Man and Son of God.* (CW 127:3) Amen.



**X. Cleaning House**

 *1 Samuel 7:2It was a long time, twenty years in all, that the ark remained at Kiriath Jearim, and all the people of Israel mourned and sought after the Lord. 3And Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, “If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.” 4So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the Lord only. 5Then Samuel said, “Assemble all Israel at Mizpah and I will intercede with the Lord for you.” 6When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, “We have sinned against the Lord.” And Samuel was leader of Israel at Mizpah.*

 What does it take to get your attention? Back in the old days before the invention of the wheel, when I was in high school, (not really that long ago, but some of my children think it was) football coaches sometimes had players who just didn’t get it. If a player didn’t get a play, the coach might grab the player by the facemask and drag him through the play—“You go here, then here, and here! Got it?!”, still holding my face mask so close that I could see the veins in his dilated eyes. I don’t know if coaches can do that anymore. But it worked.

 Which is what God sometimes does to us. When you are asking questions about the losses, the heartbreaks, who knows, maybe even the arrests or bankruptcies, one question we should be asking is if God is trying to get our attention focused on his playbook. I can’t judge God’s purpose in the tough times of your lives—but it is worth asking whether God is grabbing you by the facemask to get your attention.

 Which is what the first verse of our reading is about. For twenty years—twenty years—after the Ark came back to the Israelites, for twenty years, the Israelites were still subject to the Philistines. When the Ark came back Israel probably thought that God was on their side again. But remember Beth Shemesh? When their sin of peeking in the Ark was punished, instead of shaping up, they told God to ship out. “Move that thing out of here. It just causes us trouble.” And so God left them.

 Finally, after twenty years, Israel showed up on the doorstep of the Lord’s prophet, Samuel. The down-trodden Israelites came to God’s messenger and asked what they must do to regain the Lord’s favor. Samuel has been around a while and he knows these people, so he answers, ***“If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts…”*** These Israelites, like the rest of humanity are usually insincere. They are willing to pay lip service to God long enough to get out of a tight spot. They show up at church a few weeks if that is what it takes to get God on their side. But you can be sure that as soon as the bill collectors stop showing up, he will see neither hide nor hair of the Israelites. ***“If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts…”*** Samuel says he cannot do the dirty work for them. A little bit like a certain pastor’s wife who, as the Powerball jackpot passed half a billion dollars, had co-workers asking her to buy the tickets because maybe she had an inside track with God. “No,” Samuel says, “this isn’t about me and God, this is about you and God.” ***“If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts…”*** Samuel will do no hocus-pocus routine, no silly Wiccan incantation to magically make things better without any real change in here. Their hearts must be sincere.

 ***“If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only.”*** They need to repent, to smash the things they have held as valuable for the last twenty years or more.

 How often do we not serve our idols until it is intolerable. For some it might be the bottle or the drugs. For others it might be money or entertainment. For others it might be the social connections. For others it might be the eroticism like the Israelites with their Ashtoreths. And we serve those idols for a time, a long time. But when things go wrong, we start to look for answers.

 Samuel’s answer is ***“to serve the Lord only.”***

 This repentance takes two parts. It is not just that we clean house today, but God pleasing repentance keeps cleaning out the house. Samuel tells Israel that if they are just looking for the short-term fix, don’t bother. ***“If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only.”*** And if you are the least bit insincere about that, prepare for worse. For coming to God just to get out of a tough spot is not repentance, but it is selfishness which God can read in your heart better than you can.

 So the Israelites, ***“When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, ‘We have sinned against the Lord.’”*** They admitted, confessed, ***“We have sinned.”*** And they fasted to show the seriousness of their repentance. And for the first time in a lot longer than twenty years, Israel had a true revival, a return to the Lord.

 This is what it means to be God’s. We *“return with all our hearts.”* We *“rid ourselves of the foreign gods.”* We *“serve him only.”* We clean house. Look around in your heart. How does it look? Cluttered, confused? Do you serve God with divided loyalties? If these are a description of your life with God, you are playing with fire, with destruction.

 The only solution daily contrition and repentance in Jesus’ name. Not just carting the clutter off to Goodwill one time and letting it start to pile up all over again.

 Has God been getting your attention recently? Journey to a strange place called Mizpah. Pour out the water before the Lord. Fast, abstain from the things of this world that confuse your priorities. Repent. Clear the table of the idols. Return to God’s playbook that tells us, *“In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord”* (1 Peter 3:15).



**XII. Samuel, Picture of Christ x3**

 *1 Samuel 7:7When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled at Mizpah, the rulers of the Philistines came up to attack them. And when the Israelites heard of it, they were afraid because of the Philistines. 8They said to Samuel, “Do not stop crying out to the Lord our God for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines.” 9Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. He cried out to the Lord on Israel’s behalf, and the Lord answered him….*

 *10That day the Lord thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites… 13So the Philistines were subdued and did not invade Israelite territory again…*

 *15Samuel continued as judge over Israel all the days of his life. 16From year to year he went on a circuit from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah, judging Israel in all those places. 17But he always went back to Ramah, where his home was, and there he also judged Israel. And he built an altar there to the Lord.*

 If you go down to Nashville, on the west side of the town, in Centennial Park, you will see something that looks very out of place – an ancient Greek temple. It is a life-sized replica an ancient Greek temple called the Parthenon. The original still stands in Athens, Greece.

 If you travel to Paris, France, you can see the Statue of Liberty. Not the original—you are right in thinking that is in New York harbor—but in Paris, France there is a one fourth scale replica of America’s Statue of Liberty.

 Replicas serve a function beyond business opportunities for the tourism industry. Replicas can teach us. Without the expense of traveling to Athens, Greece, we can learn some important things about ancient culture and ourselves and the connections between the two. In a way, much of the Old Testament is a replica.

 Now usually replicas are built after the fact. First there was a Statue of Liberty in New York, then three years later Parisians in America donated a replica to their home-town of Paris. That’s the way things usually go. You have the real thing, then when people realize, “Hey, that’s pretty cool!” they build home-town versions. Same thing with the Vietnam Wall replica soon to come to Elizabethtown. Replicas, by their very nature, come after the real thing.

 Except God works a little differently. The Old Testament is a replica built before the real thing. Many, many things in the Old Testament were pictures of the future. Think of the Passover Lamb, the High Priest, the Day of Atonement. In our reading today we have one of those before-the-fact replicas.

 Listen to what Samuel does in verse three of our reading: ***“Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, ‘If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods… and serve [the Lord] only, and he will deliver you.’”*** The people of Israel stood before Samuel and he told them what they needed to hear. Samuel spoke the word, the will of the Lord. This is the work of a prophet. Samuel is a prophet.

 But Samuel is more than a prophet, he is also a man who stands in between the people and the Lord, a priest. ***“The rulers of the Philistines came up to attack [Israel]… Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. He cried out to the Lord on Israel’s behalf, and the Lord answered him.”*** Here Samuel is not a prophet. Here he is a priest. As a priest he did two things. First, he offered a sacrifice on Israel’s behalf. Offerings were a sign that no one was holy enough to approach the Lord. Every single person who came to the Lord carried the stain of sin. Only through the shedding of the blood of another could they be cleansed of the guilt of sin. That was done by the priest. Secondly, a priest intercedes, he stands between the sinner and God. Sort of like if dad is really upset with a child, and even though dad might be upset for a good reason, mom might be the voice of mercy in between the two—that is an intercessor. And so ***“[Samuel] cried out to the Lord on Israel’s behalf, and the Lord answered him.”*** The priest’s job was to sacrifice and to intercede.

 Samuel served as a prophet and a priest to Israel.

 Samuel did more. Verse 15 says, after the battle ***“Samuel continued as judge over Israel all the days of his life.”*** He wasn’t the king because Israel did not yet have kings. But Samuel is essentially the king. He led Israel in its conquests. He was responsible for dispensing justice in Israel. And yet, he did not do this on his own whim or authority, but continually appealing to the Lord’s guidance in his leadership role.

 Samuel: a godly man. Samuel: a prophet, a priest and a king all wrapped up in one. Does that remind you of anyone? It should. Samuel is a before-the-fact replica of the promised Messiah. Jesus is our Prophet, Priest and King. And Samuel was the before-the-fact replica.

 Of course, we know that replicas are not as valuable as the real thing. That is especially true in this case. Yet by looking at Israel’s prophet, priest and king Samuel, we can learn about this world’s Prophet, Priest and King, Jesus.

 Jesus is a greater prophet who spoke God’s word on his own authority. Jesus is the greater prophet who is Lord of the Church that speaks his name.

 Jesus is a priest who offered not the blood of animals for the sins of people, but a priest who offered his own God-Man blood for the sins of the world.

 Jesus is a king who does not rule with bits of earthly power. He is a king who rules all things on heaven and earth, so great is his power.

 In Samuel, Israel was made ready for what the voice of the Messiah would sound like, so that when he came, Israel would realize him, no longer a two-dimensional picture or a scaled down replica, but the voice of God’s Anointed One, Jesus of Nazareth, who has appeared as our true Prophet, Priest and King.

 May our reflection on Samuel help us better appreciate our prophet, priest and king, Jesus. Amen.