

THREE DEVOTIONAL MEDITATIONS from 1 SAMUEL

I. BIBLE HISTORY HERMENEUTICS (HOW WE UNDERSTAND BIBLE HISTORY)

Romans 15:4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Today, we begin a study of the book of First Samuel. Which is why we have a reading from Romans, right?. That's because before we study this historical book of the Bible, we must understand Bible History.

What is Bible History? Often, Bible History is treated as those nice stories we teach pretty much only in the children's Sunday School. Our reading would tell us, "Not so!" It says, "**Everything that was written... was written to teach us.**" Bible History is there for *us*, not just the kids! But as we begin Bible History, we need to understand how we should understand it. The "How" of understanding the Bible is called "hermeneutics."

If the word "hermeneutics" sounds strange to you, that's ok. It was several years into pastor-training before I understood the word. Let me give you an illustration of what *hermeneutics* is. "A stitch in time saves nine." How you understand that is hermeneutics. What is the "stitch"? It says it saves nine, nine what? What is the reason you need a stitch *in time*? What if you don't sew that stitch in time? This six word message has a huge meaning behind it. Because you understand *how* to unlock its meaning, because you understand the "hermeneutics" of English proverbs, it means something to you. That mental unlocking of the message is hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is how you understand the information in front of you.

Well, what are the hermeneutics of Bible History? There are three points.

A. One Sunday morning, I heard a preacher introduce the Old Testament reading, saying, "Today, our story from the Old Testament is from the book of Daniel" Is that a good way to introduce the Word of God? "Here, I have a story to tell you." I don't think so.

This is a problem of the English language. We frequently talk about Bible "stories". If you have or ever had children in the house, you probably have a Bible story book. But when someone says in English, "I am going to tell you a story..." I am saying that I will tell you something that may or may not be true, like Grimm's fairytales. Is that Bible History? A collection of "stories"? No!

Jesus approached Bible History as history. Lot's wife turned into salt was not a mere story. It was God's judgment upon a real person for a very real sin, and Jesus said so. Jesus talked about Adam and Eve, not as imaginary people who materialized out of the haze in the beginning of time. Jesus said that their creation is the historical basis for marriage.

First hermeneutic point: Bible stories are not stories, they are history.

B. A second point is this: Bible History is generally descriptive rather than prescriptive. Noah was a "preacher of righteousness" but he also once got so stinking drunk that he was lying around the house unclothed. Does that mean righteous people get drunk? If that is how you think, I cannot argue with you. You are beyond common sense. Genesis 9 describes what happens. But the prescriptive Bible passage is found in Ephesians 5, "Do not get drunk." Bible History describes a great many things that happened that should not have! Elsewhere the Bible makes clear what is righteous or sinful.

Even righteous acts are descriptive. Marketers open for business in the temple courtyard brought out Jesus' righteous anger. He made a whip from ropes and turned the place into chaos. Money flying, cows stampeding; some people fleeing, others crawling on the ground picking up every gold coin they could. The Bible describes what Jesus did in complete sinlessness, but what does it mean in my life? When the Women of Faith, two weeks from today are outside with their yard sale, what should I do?

Bible stories are descriptive. What is prescriptive in them – and there is a great deal that is prescriptive in Bible History – must be determined from Scripture as a whole. This is the second hermeneutic for Bible History. Bible History describes things. We determine the rightness or wrongness of these things from the whole context of Scripture.

C. Finally, and this is the most important hermeneutic, the main point of our text: What is the main purpose of Bible history?

Many people think of the Bible as an interesting story-book. Many others think of the Bible as a rule book for how we should live. Many preachers present the Bible as a guidebook: how to lead or to make decisions or whatever. Other people treat the Bible as a masterpiece of literature.

But the Apostle John wrote, and we sing, *“These words are written that we may believe, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you may have eternal life”* (20:31).

Let us remember this third hermeneutic: God wrote Bible History, even in the Old Testament, to teach us about his way of salvation. We are saved through God's undeserved love, which we now plainly see in his Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior from sin.

So as when we begin 1 Samuel, remember these three points of Bible History hermeneutics: Bible History is History not story; in Bible History we must decide if something is descriptive or prescriptive, finally, remember that the main point of the entire Bible is to teach us about our eternal salvation.

I read again our text as an introduction to 1 Samuel: *“Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”* Amen.



II. SON OF ELKANAH, PICTURE OF JESUS

1 Samuel 1:1 There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite.

How many generations of your family do you know? Do you know your father's name? I hope so. How about your grandfather? Your great-grandfather? Your great-great-grandfather? I know the name of only one of my great-grandparents, mostly because he had the same name as me. But the Old Testament is chock full of family trees. In fact, one branch of a family tree is the very first verse of 1 Samuel.

Our reading for this devotion goes like this: *“There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite.”*

Those words of Bible History are not page turners. In fact, by the end of that one verse, I would almost bet that your mind had wandered off. This verse is about a man named Elkanah, the father of the not-yet-born Samuel. What is so important about Samuel's father, grandfather, great-grandfather, great-

great-grandfather and great-great-great-grandfather that we are having a devotion about it?

If you do the difficult but rewarding work of reading your Bible cover to cover, you begin to understand some of these things. Someday, when you take the time to read 1 Chronicles chapter 6, you will read these words: “*The sons of Levi: Gershon, Kohath and Merari... [and now I am reading selected verses] The descendants of Kohath: Amminadab his son... Jeroham his son, Elkanah his son and Samuel his son...*” (16-28 selected). There is the name we are going to hear often in this sermon series.

This is the point—and it is a point so important that God could not start the story of Samuel without mentioning this point—Samuel’s father, Elkanah, was from the tribe of Levi.

Israel as a nation was divided into twelve tribes from the twelve sons of Jacob, who also called Israel. In the nation of Israel, there was one temple, first called a tabernacle. Of course, the one tabernacle or temple required people to do the work of the temple. But God had been very specific. Not just any Israelite could serve in the temple. If you were from the tribe of Judah or Benjamin or Ephraim you could not serve in the temple. You could not say, “I felt called by the Lord to serve at the temple.” No. In the Old Testament, God did not do that. God said that members of only one tribe could serve in his one temple.

God was emphatic about this. When the first tabernacle was constructed, the LORD God gave these instructions, “*Whenever the tabernacle is to move, the Levites are to take it down, and whenever the tabernacle is to be set up, the Levites shall do it. Anyone else [any of those other 11 tribes] who goes near it shall be put to death.*”

The Levites were not chosen for their goodness or even their ability, but because God said so. Which sounds so arbitrary! But as we go through the book of First Samuel, we are going to come across many more customs and rules from Old Testament religion. Things like priests and sacrifices, and dietary restrictions—rules that don’t apply to us in the New Testament.

Do you ever get tired of your parents telling you the way things used to be? I know our kids do. And we might wonder why we should listen to these words from a long ago religion that no longer applies: things like a man who is the son of so-and-so, the son of so-and-so, the son of so-and-so. But there is a point. The Old Testament way of worshiping provided lessons to people who lived hundreds of years before a Savior born in Bethlehem, before a cross on Golgotha. Old Testament religion provided pictures and portraits of a coming Messiah.

Here is the truth that God taught through the Old Testament priesthood: it is not our desire or effort, but God’s mercy and choice that bring us close to him. Or to state it plainly in New Testament words from 2 Timothy 2:9: “[God] saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.”

Those special servants, those priests from the tribe of Levi were pictures of the great high priest who would come. That great high priest would not offer the blood of sheep. He would not cleanse the people every morning and evening for a thousand years and still not get them totally pure and holy. Those Levitical priests were pictures of the true Messiah, of Jesus, who would come and offer a pure sacrifice for their sins, for once, forever.

So in chapter 3, when you enter the tabernacle with little Samuel, son of Elkanah, to tend the lights; when, in chapter 7, you watch Samuel make sacrifice for the people of Israel; in chapter 12 when you kneel in prayer with Samuel for the ever-wandering Israelites, open your eyes for a moment and look at fervently praying Samuel, the Levite. Look, and see in that Old Testament Levitical priesthood a shadow of our Savior, “*One who*” [the New Testament book of Hebrews tells us] *is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners... who sacrificed for the sins of the people once for all when he offered himself.*” (7:26-27). Amen.



III. HAPPILY MARRIED?

1 Samuel 1:2 [Elkanah] had two wives; one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none. ³Year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the LORD Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the LORD. ⁴Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. ⁵But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the LORD had closed her womb. ⁶And because the LORD had closed her womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. ⁷This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. ⁸Elkanah her husband would say to her, "Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?"

There is so much material in these seven verses that we could be here all morning. But don't worry, I won't do that to you!

Let's start with this question, a question I don't subscribe to, but a question that gets asked: "Is it a curse to be a woman?" Perhaps the woman who first asked that question felt like Hannah. Hannah was godly – and we will mention more about godly Hannah in a First Samuel devotion next month. But cultures do not always measure a woman by her godliness. In ancient Israelite culture a key measure of a woman was the number and quality of children she had. Hannah had none. All her godliness, and she was barren like the sands of the Sahara.

Her husband, Elkanah, said, "***Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?***" He intended well, but he obviously did not understand. It was not, "You, dear Hannah, mean more to me than ten sons." It was, "***Don't I mean to you more than ten sons.***"

At least God understood Hannah. But in the midst of her closest communion with God, when Elkanah's entire household went to the tabernacle at Shiloh for an annual feast, when she could open her heart to the Lord in his presence, when she could at last find some relief – there was Elkanah's second wife ridiculing her bareness. Couldn't she leave Hannah alone, at least while she worshiped the Lord? No. She would ruin Hannah's only comfort in life. Yes, for Hannah, being a woman was a curse!

But whose fault was it? Dare I suggest that Elkanah, her husband, might have had something to do with it?

No sin finds more comfortable lodging in the Old Testament than the sin of polygamy. (Here we must remember the prescriptive/descriptive hermeneutic from the first devotion). On the other hand, First Samuel portrays Elkanah as a very godly man. Please note this! He is one of few religious men or women in the time of Israel's Judges. He guided his entire family in regular worship. He felt sympathy for Hannah's problems, even if he didn't express it as eloquently as Shakespeare.

But he, like David, Solomon and others, was a polygamist. I could spend a lot of time going through Bible passages that show that polygamy is a sin. But I am going to assume that you agree. Polygamy used to happen for many reasons, none of them legitimate. And while polygamy is pretty uncommon in our day, sins against marriage are not.

We can learn from Elkanah. Elkanah had his culturally acceptable reason for polygamy. And today

men have a host of culturally acceptable reasons for not fully respecting God's gift of marriage. Jesus said this specifically to men: *"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."* You see, polygamy is only one symptom of a disease residing especially in the hearts of men, males. This is not exclusive to men. But it is far more likely. (I am speaking specifically to married men here, because these verses of Bible History speak to men. As we go through First Samuel, we will have sermons for women.)

Men are particularly tempted to sin in matters of sex and marriage, for a variety of reasons, both from inside and even more from outside. We live in a culture which feeds men's desire to be selfish.

But God says the opposite to the Christian husband, ***"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."*** A Christian husband must go against so much that the culture around him says. He will treat the wife as more important than himself – just as Christ treated the Church. He is going to treasure her as God's gift to him, even if not everything about her is pleasing to him. He is going to resist the temptations and invitations to unfaithfulness. He is going to speak well of her to others, even when he is convinced her tongue is the sharpest knife in the house. Christian husbands do this because this is how Christ has loved each of us.

When Jesus' disciples heard a similar sermon on marriage about how they were to break so many of society's expectations of husbands, they said, ***"If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry!"*** Maybe it is a curse—not to be a woman—but to be a Christian husband! A Christian husband will have to reject many cultural expectations about men's behavior and attitudes towards women. At every step he will have to curb his own natural selfishness which the sinful world continually feeds.

Or to put it another way: If God entered your home, what would he see? Would he see a man who believes that his wife exists for his benefit? Or would he see one who loves his wife like Christ loves the church?

No man can claim to be the perfect husband. We sin against our wives in our own ways. Some common to all of us, some particular to you or me. Thanks be to God that each of us men can find forgiveness in Christ for each time we have made our wives' lives a curse, a drudgery, or servitude. May that forgiveness inspire you and me to be husbands whose goal is to love our wives, as much as Christ has loved us! Amen.