

What's the Message? - Lesson 49

Today we hear the people of Israel as they cry out, give us a king!

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Our prayer is that you would not be confused, and not be misled to imagine that being in harmony with God is dependant upon a form of organization. It is dependant, however, upon our faith, our trust in God, and our obedience to Him out of love for what He has done for us. Amen.

Last time we saw the darkest day in the history of the people of Israel, to this time. The Ark of the Covenant had been captured by the Philistines, which told the Israelites that God had left their midst. Today we look at the consequences of that event.

When the Philistines captured the Ark, they rejoiced and carried it away in triumph. First they took it to their city of Ashdod, and set it up in the house of Dagon, their god. The next morning, the statue of Dagon had fallen to the ground before the Ark of God. So they put the idol back in place. On the following morning, the same thing happened, Dagon had fallen but this time his head and hands were broken off.

This was just the beginning of a series of events that impacted the Philistines and raised their fears. One by one, the Ark was sent from Ashdod to the other four major cities of Philistia over a period of seven months. But each time the Philistines were plagued with tumors, until the people had more than enough of the Ark in their presence, and demanded that it be sent back to Israel.

The details of the return are interesting, but to save time here, we invite you to read about it in chapter 6, and we will make a long story as short as possible. For the Israelites, however, the matter of the return and settlement of the Ark dragged on for over 20 years.

Then the word of Samuel went out to the house of Israel, as we read in chapter 7, beginning at verse 3: *If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you, and direct your heart to the Lord, and serve Him only.*

Next, the Lord told Samuel to gather all the people together at Mizpah, and there they confessed their sin to God. But when the Philistines heard that all Israel had gathered together they were concerned that this assembly might lead to action against them, and so they came up against Israel.

But as the Philistines grew near to attack Israel, *the Lord thundered with a mighty voice and threw them into confusion; and they were routed before Israel.* Then in verse 13 it adds: *So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel . . . all the days of Samuel.*

There is one more point we should include here in our story. When Samuel was old, and the people were concerned about a successor for him, they came to Samuel and said, *Give us a king to govern us like all the nations . . . that he may go out before us and fight our battles.*

And that, Teacher, is a quick summary of the events of chapters 5 through 8 of the book of First Samuel. In many ways, a very intriguing story, but what does it have to do with us? What's the message for us?

There are two events here. The first is the capture of the Ark of the Covenant, which we discussed in our previous lesson. And although we made the point that it is not a "magical box" that the Israelites could turn on and off at their whim, this box that symbolically showed the presence of God did have power. And when it was placed in the house of Dagon for the Philistines to show off that their god had been superior in the battle, something very unexpected happened. The false god had fallen, had "bowed down", before Yahweh. And Yahweh continued to show His power, for each time as the Philistines moved the Ark to a different city, the residents there felt the wrath of God for their disbelief. Finally, they decided it best to return this taunting symbol back to Israel where it belonged.

But the Israelites had not been faithful, and the presence of God in the midst of the Israelites was no longer a comforting presence. It was a relationship that did not change until Samuel stepped forward

and told them to put away the Ba'als and the Ashtaroth and serve the Lord only. And when they did so, and confessed their sin, the Lord returned to them and defeated their enemy. And as long as they continued in obedience, God was with them to protect them from the Philistines all the days of Samuel. Do we not see the same relationship between God and us, and that the same lesson applies in our day?

The second point is one that will change Israel for the rest of its history. As you read in chapter 8, the people demand that Samuel give them a king so that they could be like all the nations around them. Like Gideon before, Samuel was against this idea, and prayed to the Lord. And in verse 7, the Lord said to Samuel, *Hearken to the voice of the people in all they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them.* Then God told Samuel to warn the people of what would happen and how their lives would be affected by kings in the years ahead. Read this section from verse 10 through verse 18, it is a prophecy that you can trace, and see it fulfilled in the lives of the kings to come.

In rejecting God, the Israelites had placed their trust – misplaced it, is more correct – in a man-made organizational structure. They assumed that the structure of having a king would solve all their problems and make their lives better. What a modern idea! How progressive. But the real problem was not a political problem that could be solved by changing some organizational structure. It was a problem with their heart, and their commitment to God. It is a problem we still face today.

Next time we shall begin a study of a new phase in the life of Israel.