

Grace in Transition | The Book of Samuel

Ebenezer

First Samuel CH 7

10.4.20

And the men of Kiriath-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. ² From the day that the ark remained at Kiriath-jearim, the time was long, for it was twenty years; and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD.

³ Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, "If you return to the LORD with all your heart, remove the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your hearts to the LORD and serve Him alone; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines." ⁴ So the sons of Israel removed the Baals and the Ashtaroth and served the LORD alone.

⁵ Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel to Mizpah and I will pray to the LORD for you." ⁶ They gathered to Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the LORD, and fasted on that day and said there, "We have sinned against the LORD." And Samuel judged the sons of Israel at Mizpah.

⁷ Now when the Philistines heard that the sons of Israel had gathered to Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the sons of Israel heard it, they were afraid of the Philistines. ⁸ Then the sons of Israel said to Samuel, "Do not cease to cry to the LORD our God for us, that He may save us from the hand of the Philistines." ⁹ Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it for a whole burnt offering to the LORD; and Samuel cried to the LORD for Israel and the LORD answered him. ¹⁰ Now Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, and the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel. But the LORD thundered with a great thunder on that day against the Philistines and confused them, so that they were routed before Israel. ¹¹ The men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and struck them down as far as below Beth-car.

¹² Then Samuel took a stone and set it between Mizpah and Shen, and named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the LORD has helped us." ¹³ So the Philistines were subdued and they did not come anymore within the border of Israel. And the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. ¹⁴ The cities which the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron even to Gath; and Israel delivered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. So there was peace between Israel and the Amorites.

¹⁵ Now Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. ¹⁶ He used to go annually on circuit to Bethel and Gilgal and Mizpah, and he judged Israel in all these places. ¹⁷ Then his return was to Ramah, for his house was there, and there he judged Israel; and he built there an altar to the LORD.

We've been looking at a period of sweeping change in ancient Israel (c. 1000BC) transition taking place in all of society. After generations of chaos/decline and near anarchy and brutality, Israel is awakened... and sort of reborn by God's initiative.

God shakes things up and things begin to change.

And as we've noted, OUR own society also seems to be in transition. Not only very recent events (3Ps pandemic, politics and protests) but also longer-range changes/trends: communications, world-politics, marriage/family, transportation, organized religion, gender-relations, climate-change. We could go on and on. We all have some sense that we're in transition. God seems to be shaking things up.

We'll see today, that God used that period of change in the ancient world to bring about what we might call "revival," the renewal of God's cause on planet earth AND the spiritual health of His people.

And WE hope... WE pray...that our recent upheavals will have the same result... Even if you're NOT YET a believer in Jesus Christ...if you're a spiritual person or any person who wants well-being in the world – you hope this odd merger of events will have a good outcome...right? Everyone wants the world to be better after this... Right? ("Waitin' on the World to Change")

Now... you may be pessimistic... but at least you WANT things to emerge better than they were... to see people thriving internationally... economically.

We all WANT peace/prosperity and for all people to know TRUTH. Is it at least possible that God is shaking things up... for the BETTER?

And if so, IS there anything we can do to GO ALONG WITH (Gal 5.25) WHAT GOD MIGHT BE DOING?

We often say that "a crisis is a terrible thing to waste" but THIS is a BIG CRISIS, a national and global time of dramatic transition – so, how do we NOT WASTE this one?

Can YOU cooperate or (v. 3), "direct your hearts to the Lord"? What would that mean? What would that look like on a daily basis? Can we prepare for and participate in revival?

Let's look at that –

- 1) The Path/Arc of Revival**
- 2) Clergy Is Key**
- 3) The Physical AND Spiritual In Worship**

History will tell the story. Hindsight is 20/20 and only by looking backward will people have any accurate view of 2020 and what it really meant... But there are some who think they see it NOW...and there may BE some who DO see it now. People with insight, futurists, artists, visionaries...every generation has them. We just don't know who they are.

The singer Lana Del Rey recently said (what I THINK were some very insightful things) that what's happening NATIONALLY (on a grand scale) is a picture of what's happening individually... like families and persons have "been [in] existential panic for a long time" but we keep it tamped-down by shopping for shoes! And now that our consumerism and our little distractions and our "false integration points" (Schaeffer) are taken away, we have to look at each other AND "we have to bump up against ourselves." Maybe her idea is widespread.

I'm not saying that Lana Del Rey is a prophet (she's an artist!)... but maybe she sees at least some of the significance of what's happening in this present crisis/transition... I DON'T KNOW; but I DO know that there WAS a prophet in Ancient Israel, Samuel.

He's been absent for three whole chapters. Some say that the twenty-years in v. 2 refers to the time between Samuel being announced as a prophet (maybe age 12) and when (20 years later – now maybe 32 years old) when he was acknowledged as a prophet. And Samuel – was given insight. For 20 years (12-32) Samuel had been preaching and the people had been "lamenting" (2).

Samuel was interpreting the times. He saw that YHWH, God of Israel, defeated the Philistines and their god (Dagon). Then God liberated His people by sending plagues on the Philistines ... and God drove that cart with the Ark back to the Land. Samuel saw that this was a new Exodus! God defeats Dagon like He once defeated the gods of Egypt. He freed His people once again using plagues and He defeated the people of the land by His own Presence.

God is at work here and Samuel has (not just insight but) the Word of the Lord – the prophet knew that God was repeating that "paradigmatic" event, the Exodus, the pattern/paradigm for all God's rescue-work in the whole Bible. Samuel saw the unwavering intentions of God to rescue His people again and again just as He did from Egypt.

Then Samuel gathers them to say, "Repentance is the way to respond." To lament, to feel true sorrow over our failings – THIS is the right response. AND if they really WERE sorrowful then put these emotions to the test – "if you want to express sorrow...if it's really holy lament planted by God then get rid of your 'plan-B': get rid of the foreign gods AND direct your hearts to the Lord and to Him ALONE!"

Samuel's calling the people to repent and believe. Turn away from false sources of salvation (the fertility gods – Ashtaroth and Baal) and trust YHWH alone. This is the basic response of the

spiritual life – turn AWAY from false sources and turn TO the God who saves: repent and believe (spiritual respiration!)

And the people DO. What was going on in their hearts these 20 years – this lamenting was real and now they express it: they repent and believe. Samuel prayed for them and they “poured out water” – a symbol for baring one’s heart before God (1Sam 1.15; Ps 62.8, 42.4; Lam 2.19 et al). They’re responding to God’s grace – how He (with NO help from them) brought plagues to save them from the stronger enemy and returned the Ark to the Land – without their doing anything! “The kindness of God leads to repentance” (Rom 2.4)

They’ve had a very vivid picture that God is mighty to save, He does NOT need them but He’s fully devoted to their liberation from sin and from their enemies.

Then the Philistines hear that the Israelites have gathered and they come again to war against the Israelites. And Israel was afraid (mirror opposite of CH 4 when the Philistines were afraid -- 4.7). The self-confident rushing into battle that we saw in CH 4 is GONE and the superstitious use of the Ark as a good-luck-charm is GONE...instead they cry out to the priest, Samuel (v. 8), “Pray for us, Samuel!”

And Samuel offers a sacrifice. A new lamb for a new Israel – they’re reborn! It’s a worship service before a battle. It seems like a dumb idea – but it’s actually a “royal waste of time” (Marva Dawn) and God loves it because in it we exhibit our total reliance on Him.

So, God thunders against the Philistines and they're routed. And the men of Israel chased them away... and they stayed gone as long as Samuel was leader.

Then Samuel takes a boulder (as Jacob and Joshua had done Gen 28.18; Jos 4, 24.26) and names the place Ebenezer - a rock of help, “Thus far has the Lord been our Help” – a physical reminder of a spiritual reality, a witness to future generations that WE DIDN’T HELP GOD BUT GOD HELPED US AND WE SIMPLY RECEIVED IT AS A GIFT – we trusted Him.

And then a kind of wrap-up – the heavy, glorious Hand subdued the Philistines and was against them all the days of Samuel’s being the preacher...and Samuel continued to teach as widely as he could (a circuit) and to promote that “royal waste of time” (worship; altar).

A long time of phony-freedom (“every man did what was right in his own eyes – no king in Israel”) and trusting gods that are NOT able to save (have to be picked up when they fall down) and all the violence and war and disarray that comes from that. AND THEN, God vividly reminds them of their history, the Exodus, by saving and freeing them... and then the priest interprets the times for them and they repent and believe... and the change is good.

That’s the trajectory of revival.

And notice...that clergy is the key. Samuel is the man of God's choosing. He's a faithful priest and a preacher. He leads them in that worship where they see what they deserve – death of a lamb...but God gives IT as a substitute in their place. And their attendance to that – their repenting and believing – shows they're depending on God. They're still afraid, BUT God is their Rock of Help, Ebenezer.

And you may be thinking, "Yeah real nice, T.J.! Clergy is key and YOU ARE CLERGY!...A little self-serving...don't ya' think?!"

Well I do believe that leaders in the Church are important. I think Christian ministers in Christian Churches ought to be... Christian. I'm convinced that WE (the elders of this church included) have to make sure the churches focus on Christ... not life-skills or moral imperatives or social-action or "the political illusion" (Ellul) but the God of the Exodus... the God who atones for and redeems His people. If Christian clergy won't be Christ-ian then we waste this crisis. So pray for the elders of this church and all churches in all the world!

BUT when I say, "CLERGY is key" (Isa 22.22)... I have in mind, the One True High Priest... Do you see Him in this passage? He is the Better Samuel and the Church says, (8) "Lord Jesus Christ, do not cease to cry out for us – IF YOU DON'T intercede for us, if You don't represent us before the Father's throne – we won't make it! The hand of the World will crush us."

Jesus Christ is that sympathetic High Priest who not only OFFERS the sacrifice but IS the sacrifice – He's the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

He is the Singer of the Psalms who leads us in worship. And in His leading us into that "royal waste of time"...as we lose our time, money, voices (as we risk our lives to gather!) – it all seems kinda silly and impractical...and yet, when we lose our lives we find them! Worship is this wonderful, counterintuitive exercise... We repent and we become joyful ("Happy are the sad – Blessed are those who mourn...")

We come together...and hopefully it's been happening through your week that whether it's shopping for shoes or advertising how good you are (and RIGHT!) looking to sex, power or money to save you and satisfy you like only God can... When we come together, we repent and believe and we say, "Only by the life-death-resurrection of Jesus Christ am I acceptable in the sight of God...declared forgiven...innocent and RIGHTEOUS in the sight of God because of Him – I don't help God... HE, Jesus Christ, the God-Man helps ME!"

And that brings me to the final and briefest point – today, we stand together to do something spiritual... and yet ... physical. We get to look and touch and taste physical things (bread and wine) as an aid to our faith. It's hard to believe because "faith is the conviction of things not

seen” (Heb 11.1) and we want to see. We want to control but God calls us to trust...AND HE KNOWS OUR WEAKNESS (Ps 103.13-14) and He helps us believe.

Just as that Rock was there to remind them and constantly encourage each generation to trust God our Help, so the sacraments give us something to sense, see, touch and taste. And here, mysteriously, Jesus Christ, is present to feed us with Himself.

As our mouths take the bread and wine so our repentant-faith TAKES Jesus Christ and we are nourished... the Presence of Jesus Christ, His grace, forgiveness and new life is ingested – the physical is used to convey spiritual benefit.

We’re NOT ghosts...we’re physical. Samuel was physical. Their repentance was demonstrated in physical ways.

AND WE, the physical church... we are here... gathered for worship physically to be a kind of Ebenezer to the world – to say, “Thus far God has helped us – come join us! Hear the good news and repent and believe with us...”

It may take generations...20 years... we don’t know. Our job is not to know times... but to know from whence our help comes (Ps 121)... continuing to hear Good News, repenting and believing and being ready to share our Bread with whoever hungers for “life, life, eternal life.”