

Home from the Hog Pen

1 Samuel 7:1-10

The tabernacle at Shiloh was an empty shell. The high priest was dead. And so were his sons. But that was not the worst of it. The innermost sanctuary, the most holy place of all, was empty.

For months, the ark was held captive by the Philistines. Now it was back in Israel, but it was far to the south in Kiriath-jearim.

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. Verse 1

Each autumn, Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, came and went. It was supposed to be the holy day the high priest sprinkled blood on the mercy seat: the shimmering gold lid of the ark.

The blood was to cover the sins of all God's people. But the ark sat in a back room of Abinadab's hilltop home. And there was no high priest. So there was no sacrifice, no blood, no forgiveness.

And the sins of Jacob's descendants decayed into debauchery. For long years, worship at the tabernacle had been little more than posturing and pretense. The Jews kept the rituals and regulations of God's law. But the loving Lord who delivered Israel's ancestors from slavery did not really own their hearts.

Their faith was an empty shell of words and works. And when they got home from the feasts and festivals at Shiloh, the shell came off. They kept little house idols of pagan gods, bowed down to Baal and crept down the perfumed passageways of Ashtaroth's temple.

But now weeds sprouted in the tabernacle courtyards. So there was no longer any need to pretend. The people could leave their shell faith behind and live as they please. And that is just what they did.

But that was inevitable. If our faith in Jesus Christ is little more than a Sunday parade, we can hide behind our pious words and pretended purity for a while. But only for a while. Before long the sham will slip away. And everyone will see us as we really are.

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. Matthew 6:24

Revival's Preparation

Despair and Desire

The double-minded people of Israel grinned and gloated at first. They did not have to make the long journey to Shiloh anymore. They could leave behind all the Law's offerings and austerity and forget all the sacrifices and service God required.

But then, the prodigal son also had a smile on his face as he walked away from his father's farmhouse, jingling gold coins in his pocket. The smile soon faded, though. And Israel's ribald rejoicing and riotous revelry didn't last long, either.

Even in barrooms and brothels, the prodigal knew his father still loved him. And it was a secret source of security to know his father was watching out the window and praying for him.

That was what made it so hard for Israel to abandon themselves to paganism. They did not believe their God was watching and waiting for them any more..

In fact, they were pretty sure He had abandoned them. He had not gone into battle with them. And when the Philistines returned the ark, the Lord looked upon them with wrath and rage.

That took all the shine and sparkle out of Israel's sin. For long years, they had been like a prodigal who returned home yet longed for the husks and hogs of his old life.

But like that young man, they knew they could always go back home. And their loving Father would be waiting for them. Now they weren't so sure.

That is the ugly edge to sin. Every sin's source is Satan himself. And by his very nature, our eternal enemy is a liar.

That is one reason why our heavenly Father hates sin. It opens a window through the protective wall God's Spirit builds around us. And when we open any window to the devil, he pours his darkness, deceit and despair through it.

That is just what happened to Israel. They sank into a deep despair and felt they were lost beyond restoration. Yes, the Israelites knew God had the power to reach down and pull them out the muck and mire they had chosen.

But they thought He was so disgusted with them, He did not want to. And they were without hope.

But that is the lie of all lies. There is no end to our Lord's love; it is limitless. We cannot sin so much, wander so far, or stay away so long that our God will give up on us.

In Israel, swaggering, Philistine soldiers and sneering overlords became more and more oppressive. But Israel did not grieve over their service and slavery to the lords of Philistia. Their sorrow was deeper than that. They grieved after God.

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. Verse 2

The people of Israel did not realize it, but they had crossed a very important line. For long years, they had griped and grouched that they were oppressed by Philistia. After a while, the anger became tears. And they groaned because of the pain and persecution.

But now, Israel's grief was no longer focused upon their hardships. Instead, they lamented that they had lost their Lord. They could stand the whips and swords of the Philistines. But they were filled with dark despair that they had lost the sweet comfort and solid consolation of their loving God.

More than anything, they wanted to come home to God. And that is the seed of change. If God is to renew and revive our relationship with Him, we must first see ourselves as we are.

The prodigal woke up one day and realized he was in a pig pen. And we have to wake up and see the sin that has sickened our spirits.

More than that, our sorrow must be more than a selfish squealing over the pain our sin has brought us. No, our great desire must be to come back to God, to serve and stand for Him, to love and live for Him as we once did.

It took Israel twenty years of despair to spark that desire. But they could have come back to their God anytime. And so can we.

Revival's Process Decision and Determination

For twenty years, Samuel wandered from city to city, from village to village, and from synagogue to synagogue. Sometimes, his audience was small: a farm family or a few shopkeepers. And sometimes he spoke by lamplight.

But his message was always the same. He proclaimed it to the rich and the poor, to the young and the old.

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." Verse 3

The people did not believe they could return to the loving Lord they had abandoned and ignored. But Samuel assured them they could return to God. And He would welcome them back home.

With both Israel and us, coming home to God really begins with a decision. After all, who knows how many months the prodigal hated his life among a pagan farmer's pigs.

But hating our sin, our shame, and our sorrow is not enough. We must do what the prodigal did. We must reach a point of decision.

However, deciding alone won't do. The prodigal did not merely decide to leave the hog lot and go home. He actually did it. And so did the Israelites.

So the sons of Israel removed the Baals and the Ashtaroth and served the Lord alone. Verse 4

Yes, Samuel did tell his people they could return to God. But they had to do it the Lord's way. First, they had to decide to leave their sinful lives behind and go home to God.

Secondly, they had to direct their hearts to God. Before, their desire was half hearted and their devotion was divided. But if they were to find a renewed relationship with God, that had to end.

They had to commit themselves to serving God and serving Him alone. Nothing held back. They had to come to the Lord with all their heart: with complete devotion.

But their devotion was not all that had to be complete. Their determination did too. The prodigal could not go home to his father and still stay in the pig pen. He had to leave the husks and the hogs behind for all time.

In the same way, Israel had to leave their paganism and idolatry behind. It was not enough for them to confess that bowing down before a stone statue of Baal was sin. They had to stop worshiping that pagan idol. More than that, they had to destroy all the little home idols and pagan shrines they had set up.

That is what we must also do if we are to restore and revive our relationship with our Redeemer. We must not only feel shame and sorrow that we have sinned. We must also stop sinning.

And that is not all. We must also take positive steps to put an everlasting end to our wicked, wayward ways. We must discard and destroy the darkness which we have indulged.

We must change our habits and start serving our Savior all the time and all the way, with all our hearts and all our might.

Revival's Power Dependence and Deliverance

The people of Israel had not made the connection. But the sorrow and suffering they were experiencing under the iron hand of Philistia was the direct result of wandering away from their God.

That is always the case. Jesus said sin is not something we do. It is a slave master we serve.

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin." John 8:34

It makes no difference what kind of idol we indulge, either. Whether we wander off after pleasure, profit, or pride, the result will be oppression. And the reason is simple. Paul wrote that when we sin, we are offering ourselves as slaves and willingly serving the prince of darkness.

...when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? Romans 6:16 (NIV)

That is what Israel did. The result was defeat and despair. And we are fools to believe the outcome will be any different with us.

If we try to live for Christ and still sin, we are opening up ourselves to the devil's poison. And that poison will pump and pulse into every area of our lives.

It will bring depression and despair to our minds. It will bring division and decay to our families. And it will bring death and darkness to our relationship with our Redeemer.

Israel had made a good start. But they were not yet fully free. So Samuel called all the people to gather together at Mizpah.

Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel to Mizpah and I will pray to the Lord for you." 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. Verses 5-6

Samuel was their intercessor. And the people depended upon him to present their pleas for forgiveness to God. But we also have an intercessor. Our Savior sits at the Father's side as our High Priest.

Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Romans 8:34

But as Samuel prayed, the five princes of Philistia amassed their armies to attack God's people.

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. Verse 7

The simple shopkeepers and farmers of Israel had gathered at Mizpah to pray not to wage war. So they were terrified when they saw the rising clouds of dust from chariot wheels and the glint of sunlight on Philistine swords. So all of Israel begged Samuel not to stop praying for them.

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." 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. Verses 8-9

The lamb was only eight days old and still dependent upon its mother for milk. That was the sacrifice Samuel offered.

The prophet of Israel was not content to rely upon confession and commitment. He knew that was not enough. He also had to come to God with a blood sacrifice.

God's own beloved Son is our sacrificial lamb. That is what John the Baptist called Jesus when the desert prophet first saw Him.

Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

John 1:29

And just as Samuel did, we must depend upon the blood shed for our sins if we are to be empowered to return to Him.

The Philistines were Israel's oppressors and slave masters. Satan is ours. And he can only be conquered by depending upon the blood Jesus shed for us on the cross.

And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb... Revelation 12:11 (ESV)

The armies of Philistia marched closer and closer. But Samuel did not even glance in their direction. He wasted no time trying to think of military strategies, either. Instead, he gave all his attention to the blood sacrifice he was offering.

Samuel promised his people, not merely that they would be delivered from their oppressors, but that God would deliver them. So he depended utterly and absolutely upon God to do just that.

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. Verse 10

Samuel knew Israel could not conquer the Philistines by their own efforts. And we must never forget that we cannot defeat the devil's darkness, defeat and despair alone.

Only the power of Jesus's blood can overcome our enemy. So like Samuel, we dare not trust in anything else.

The voice of God thundered at Mizpah that day. And Philistia was defeated by God's power. It is the glory of the gospel that our Lord will do the same for us if we will do what the Israelites did.

They confessed and forsook their sins. They returned to God with all their hearts. And, through Samuel, they depended upon the blood of a sacrifice.

If we return to God as Israel did, our Lord will do the same for us. He will faithfully deliver us from the whip and chains our sin has caused.

But we must not forget. If we want God to be wholly for us, we must be wholly for Him.

There is no other way.

