
Day 86 - March 27

Israel as a Monarchy (1100 – 930 BCE)

Samuel Brings About Transition

Reading: *1 Samuel 3:1-7:17*

Reflections:

- Opening key line: “In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.” This helps the reader understand how cut off Israel is from God’s leadership. God actually desires open and continual communication with his children but in this season of Israel’s life, the relationship is broken down; as we just witnessed in the book of Judges.
- As Samuel as a young boy hears God speak, he is confused and thinks it is Eli. “Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord. The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.” This story raises the question if people can have God speak to them and because they have not been taught about God speaking, may miss it. For example, God speaking to someone in a dream but the person not realizing that God was revealing something to them. As we will see when Jesus comes and God gives his Spirit to all people, God’s purpose is that all people will be able to hear God’s voice and have an open two-way relationship. Joel 2:28-29 prophecies this.
- One key to growing in hearing God speak is simply taking time to listen. Samuel said, “Speak for your servant is listening.”
- Samuel’s first clear word from God is a tough one to actually deliver. But he does have the courage and Eli apparently accepts the fact that his family is under judgment. It is interesting that Eli appears to not repent but simply accepts the judgment.
- Key verses: “The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground. All Israel...recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord. The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word. And Samuel’s word came to all Israel.” Here we see the beginning of God re-establishing his leadership over the nation through a called leader.

- The story of the capture of the ark is fascinating. First, it shows that God's presence does not work like magic. The ark was a symbol of God's presence being among the people. They tried to use it as a lucky charm to win a battle and were defeated. It even gave the soldiers a great emotional surge of confidence (the shout that shook the ground). But because of the sin in the priesthood, particularly Eli's family, God's presence was not with them and they suffered a terrible defeat.
- Eli's death is also very striking. Remember how one of the main issues in his family was over eating? He dies in his old age because when he falls over in shock from hearing the ark has been captured. His neck breaks because "he was an old man and heavy." His ongoing sin was a part of the reason he died. Sometimes sin or living in an unhealthy way doesn't seem obvious at first but it sneaks up on us and brings calamity when we least expect it.
- Again a woman, this time Eli's widowed daughter-in-law, gives us a visual image or a sign of what is happening in Israel. She dies in childbirth with no apparent care about the future, but just despair. And yet she does have a son that is named "Ichabod" which means "no glory." The image of a son being born is hope that a new generation is emerging and in fact, through Samuel we will see that.
- The story of the ark among the Philistines makes it clear God did not want the sign of his presence, the ark, to be lost to Israel. So he brings judgment on the Philistines for having stolen the ark. This story shows God's ultimate power and reality over all other idols or perceived gods. The image of rats and tumors seems to suggest a type of black plague. Here again it is interesting that he uses a judgment that seems linked to nature, similar to Egypt. When the Philistines finally want to return the ark, they still want to double check because they have doubts, this may simply be coincidence. So they use two cows that have calved and have never been yoked. In other words, normally these cows would never leave and wander off because of the instinct to remain with their young calves. Anyway, they do return the ark which shows that God was ultimately the one behind the judgment. The gold tumors and rats combine the gold of gifts and the images of repentance. They acknowledge in the images the judgment that came on them for having taken the ark.
- The cart and cows become a sacrifice to God. The people sacrifice to God. They acknowledge all that has happened and yet 70 men are put to death. There is an interesting note that the majority of texts say 50,070 but this seems over the top. 70 men could be an actual number or a symbolic number for "a lot of men." In either case, the story suggests a lot of men died from not treating the presence of God as holy. The key question is: "Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God?" The answer is that no one can, unless you are a friend of God like Abraham or Moses. So, this again reminds us that in this period, our separation from God is what is being emphasized.

Our innate sinfulness is being shown to make us completely unable to stand in God's presence. Under Jesus though, all of this will change.

- Samuel then leads the people in repentance before God: cleansing themselves from idols, serving God alone, fasting and humbling themselves before God. As people respond in repentance, Samuel becomes their spiritual leader.
- Finally Israel has victory over the Philistines and reclaims the towns they had invaded and captured. Having said this, it is clear that it is God who wins the battle. He sends a roar of thunder that causes panic and confusion. Like in the days of Joshua, God is the warrior that wins the battle, not Israel.
- Samuel becomes a judge over Israel. He is viewed here as a righteous judge and quite unlike many of the judges chronicled in the book of Judges. We are now ready for God to reveal Israel's first king.