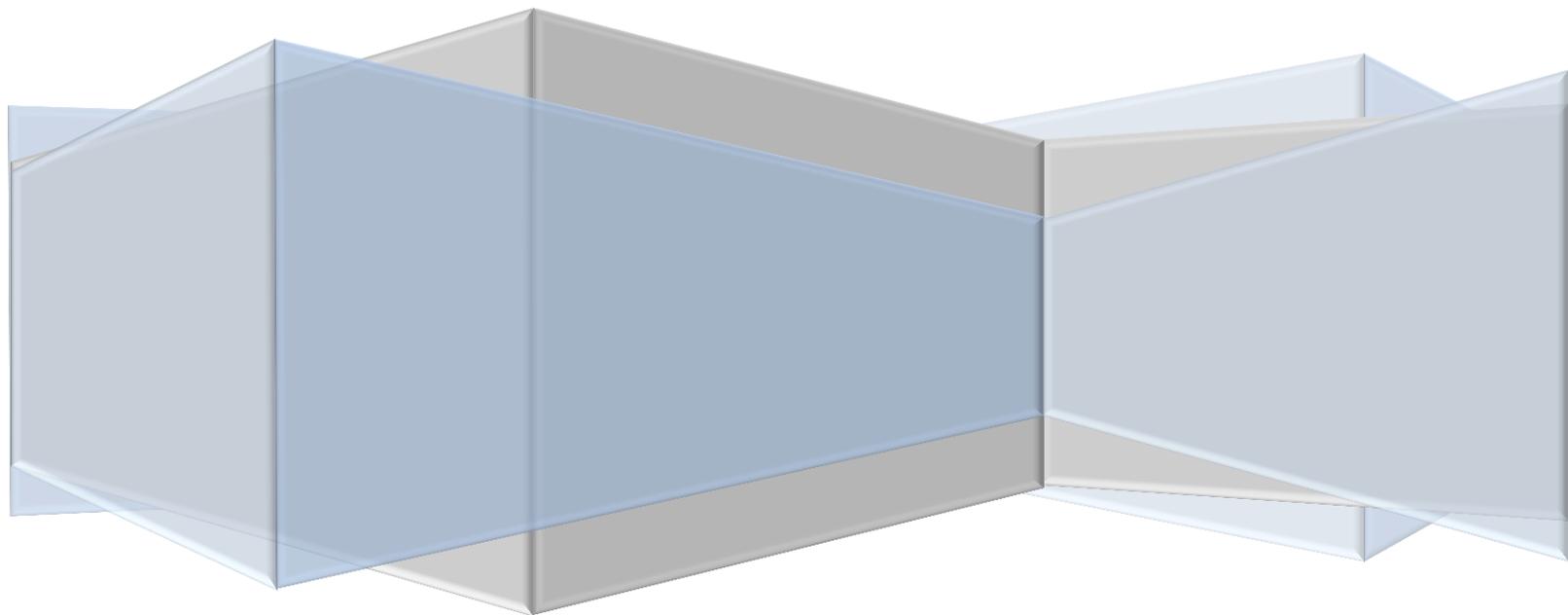


Calvary Baptist Church of Lamar

The Bible Story Line

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Discussions on the Bible Story Line

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These short messages were used in the Wednesday Prayer Meetings of the Calvary Baptist Church.

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1.

War in Heaven

The history of the world is simply the story of the restoration of God's kingdom on earth. The whole of creation serves to highlight King Jesus and His glorious reign over all things (Col. 1:16). The fall of Adam was the event that allowed for the corruption of the entire creation, holding it in bondage to sin and Satan (Rom. 8:20-25).

Driven from the Garden of Eden to suffer the consequences of their disobedience (Gen. 3:24), the first couple also experienced the blessings of God's gracious saving work as pictured in their being clothed by God (Gen. 3:21) in garments of speaking of the righteousness He will use to clothe all His people (Isa. 61:10; Rev. 19:8). He also provided them with the promise of Genesis 3:15. That promise was a declaration of God's intent to win the war begun in heaven between the angelic hosts—the holy angels vs. Satan and the fallen angels (Rev. 12:7).

On Revelation 12:1-6, Don Carson comments: "It is not difficult to recognize the essence of the Christian story in vv. 1–6." He cites the numerous references to similar stories of the conflict between the powers of heaven and hell in every ancient culture. For example, the Babylonian account has Marduk's slaying Tiamat, the seven-headed monster of the deep. Marduk's mother is similarly depicted as the woman of Revelation 12. Tiamat's war with heaven resulted in his throwing down one-third of the stars.

Marduk is the name that the Babylonians gave to Nimrod (Gen. 19:8-10). The Egyptians tell it thus: the goddess Hathor or Isis, wife of Osiris (Nimrod again) fled from the red dragon Typhon to an island; the dragon was overcome by her son Horus and finally destroyed by fire. The Canaanite version has Baal (you guessed it, Nimrod) battling the storm god, Yam, the prince of the sea. The point is, the religions of man tell the story of war in heaven, but they put Satan in the winner's seat. The serpent (Satan) is a usurper and deceiver—the antichrist. In order to avoid the sentence passed on him (to have his head crushed), he must defeat the seed of the woman (the Christ). His doom is sure (Rev. 12:8-11) but he apparently does not think so; at least he is not taking it sitting down.

The history of Israel is the story of this conflict played out on earth. Israel is the battlefield. God chose Abraham and his descendants to wage war on Satan and recover his stolen property, the universe. We have traced God's purpose to establish Canaan as His sanctuary land, the new Eden, where He would dwell among his people as their God (Exodus 29:46). The enemy does not want it so, but Yahweh will ultimately prevail.

As New Testament believers, we also are warned to keep vigil (1 Pet. 5:8; Gal. 6:1; Eph. 6:18). Paul warned the Corinthian believers: "*But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ*" (2 Corinthians 11:3, see v. 4). "*Watch and pray*" (Matt. 26:41).

2.

God's Plan of the Ages

In Genesis 1:26 the Lord said, “*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.*” What does it mean for humans to be in the image of God? God’s image is not something transient such as intelligence, self-awareness, emotional capacity, or free will. If so, children in the womb would not be in God’s image since these things are developed after birth. There is no such thing as partial or developing image. Man was created in the image of God, period (Gen 1:26–27; 5:1–3; 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7).

Neither can *image* be equated with the human soul, the life principle breathed into Adam at creation (1 Cor. 15:45), since animals are also said to be living souls (Gen. 1:24, Heb. *nephesh khah*; Rev. 16:3).

Image relates to God’s purpose for creating mankind, which is clearly stated in Genesis 1:28. Image relates to mankind’s unique *representation* of God in the creation, subduing and having dominion over it in His name and for His sake. The invisible God would dwell among His image bearers who, in turn represent Him and act for Him in ruling His creation.

The story of Genesis 1–11 narrates the rebellious response of spiritual entities to corrupt God’s image in Adam and his posterity (out of jealousy, perhaps?) in order to usurp dominion over the creation (1 Cor. 4:4—“*the god of this world*”). This rebellion occurred not only in the fall of Genesis 3, but in the transgression of the fallen watchers in Genesis 6 and the rebellion of Noah’s corrupt posterity at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11).

From Genesis 12 on, the rest of Scripture narrates God’s design to save and restore His creation (John 5:17, 19–24). The story begins with Abraham and God’s covenant to bless the nations that were effectively disinherited at Babel (Gen. 12:3; Deut. 32:8, 9). This covenant with Abraham must be understood in light God’s giving “*the sons of God*” dominion over all the nations save one, His people, Israel (Deut. 32:8, 9; Acts 17:26; Psa. 82).

From Abraham came Jesus, the true image of God (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3; 2 Cor. 4:4). As *Immanuel* (“God with us,” Isa. 7:14), His work is to restore God’s image in His people (Rom. 8:29; Col. 3:10; 2 Cor. 3:18). The end of this work will be a perfect “man” dwelling with God in His new creation and fulfilling the original plan (1 Cor. 15:49; 1 John 3:2; Rev. 22:1–5).

It is important to understand the significance of the church in this image restoration. Through “*wisdom and insight*” we understand the mystery of His will (Eph. 1:8–10). Through the “*grace and the power of God,*” the church “*grows up into Him*” (Eph. 3:16–19; 4:13–15; Gal. 4:19). The church is God’s new Eden (temple) for this work (Eph. 2:18–22). It is the church that Paul references when he says “*that he might create in himself one new man [singular].*” . . . “*In him you [the church] also are being built together into a dwelling place [singular] for God by the Spirit*” (Eph. 1:15, 22).

3.

Understanding the Conquest

Reading the Old Testament with its many references to the lands, peoples, and kingdoms can get confusing, especially when two or more names are used in different writings for the same people or place. Canaan (“merchant”) refers to the land (Genesis 17:8), and the people occupying it are Canaanites. In Joshua 15:1-15, six people groups are named: Canaanite, Amorite, Hittite, Perizzite, Jebusite, and Hivite. They are all the descendants of Canaan, the son of Ham, the son of Noah (Genesis 10:15-20). Deuteronomy 7:1 lists the seven “nations” (*goyim*, non-Hebrew ethnic groups): the six above plus the Girgashites (Acts 13:19). Two significant groups, among others, are not listed, the Philistines and the Phoenicians.

Canaanite territory includes Phoenicia on the western coast, north of Philistia. Its inhabitants were the descendants of Canaan’s firstborn son, Sidon.

The land of Canaan is also called Palestine, its modern name. Technically, Palestine means land of the Philistines (Philistia). The Philistines, however, controlled only the coastal region in the south. Perhaps travelers coming to the coastal cities incorrectly called the whole land Palestine. The Philistines are descended from Casluhim, the son of Mizraim (Egypt), the brother of Canaan (Genesis 10:14; 1 Chronicles 1:12). They originally came from Caphtor or Crete (Deuteronomy 2:23; Amos 9:7).

The Amorites (*Amurru*, “western”) settled Canaan before Abraham. These people came into the land of Canaan from Mesopotamia east of Canaan. How they came is not known for certain, but Abraham probably followed the migration route of the early Amorites when he came into Canaan via the Fertile Crescent. An early confederate of Abraham in Canaan was Mamre, the Amorite (Genesis 14:13). As with the term *Canaanite*, *Amorite* may be inclusive of other tribal groups of similar lineage because the Amorites were the dominant tribe.

Perizzites were hill country dwellers but are not named in the table of nations (Genesis 10). The name is close to the Hebrew term, *peraza*, which means village or hamlet. Thus, the Perizzite probably refers, not to parentage but to place of residence.

The Hittites are also a problem to scholars because of the scarcity of evidence for their existence in Canaan. Hittites are the descendants of Heth, yet another of Canaan’s sons. The majority of the Hittites were located in Asia Minor. There was also a Hittite kingdom in Syria. The Hittites located in Canaan were probably few in number, leaving little evidence of their existence (note Genesis 15:20; 23:3; Deuteronomy 7:1; Judges 3:5).

As we discussed previously, giants were observed among the Amorites and Philistines. The question is, how were the giants descended from Canaan? They are called Nephilim in Numbers 13:33 and a reference in Amos 2:9, 10 describes the Amorite whose height was like that of the cedars—30 feet high! Certainly not all Amorites were that tall. The giants probably came from the Amorite clans Rephaim (“giant”) and Anakim (children of Anak). Og of Bashan, king at Astaroth and Edrei, was a giant and an Amorite Rephaim (Deuteronomy 3:11). The giants living among the Philistines, however, were not identified by any specific clan (1 Samuel 17:4; see also 1 Chronicles 20:4-8).

4.

Covenant Renewal

It has been argued that Joshua 8:30-35 actually belongs, chronologically, after 5:2 because Moses charged Joshua to renew the covenant when they first entered Canaan (Deut. 27:4ff). The Dead Sea scroll manuscripts place the incident after 5:2. If that is the correct location, why was it placed in its present location? This location, after the fall of Ai, seems to be more logical and appropriate. The geographical location of the covenant renewal (the central highlands) also argues for its current place in our text. It would have been strategically difficult to travel to Shechem (40 miles north of Jerusalem—modern Nablus) upon first entering the land for a ceremony only to return to Gilgal near Jericho.

The renewal of the covenant at Shechem has significant historical importance. Abraham built his altar in this location (Gen. 12:6, 7) where the Lord first appeared to Him in Canaan. The altar expressed his faith in God's purpose to make Canaan His sanctuary (like Eden). Later, Jacob came from his stay at Paddan Aram to settle at Shechem and to build an altar on ground purchased from the sons of Hamor (Gen. 33:18-20). Jacob also expressed his faith in God's promise to give Canaan to Israel as a possession, the altar symbolizing God's claim of ownership. Jacob called his altar El-Elohe-Israel (God, the God of Israel). In the text before us, the national extension of the man, Jacob, also appeared at Shechem to express faith in the pledge of God to his people to actually possess the land promised to the fathers. They came to this place because they already owned it.

Second, there is significant theological importance to having the covenant renewed at this point in the conquest. The breach of the covenant by Achan was discovered and judged. Joshua built the altar on Mount Ebal, the mountain of curses (Deut. 11:29), a location that appropriately symbolized God's work in removing the curse of their covenant sin. Uncut stones were used, speaking of God's ownership of the whole process. The burnt offerings pointed to Israel's forgiveness and total consecration to God; the peace offerings spoke of Israel's communion with God as a consequence of their vicarious participation in the ransom. This ceremony renewed the first ratification of the covenant (Ex. 24:5) and prefigured the blood of the New Covenant (Luke 22:20).

The ceremony itself involved dividing the people, half standing in front of Mount Gerizim (the mount of blessings) and half standing before Mount Ebal (the mount of curses). Between them the priests and the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of Yahweh's throne, were stationed. Joshua then read the blessings and the curses from Deuteronomy 27, the expression of God's treaty with Israel.

The Law was not a list of rules to keep in order to stay on God's blessing side. The Law instructed the *relationship* with God and the focus was to remain on the *relationship*. Our relationship to Christ is governed by Christ's law. In Luke 14:25ff, Jesus defines the three obstacles to the would-be disciple's relationship: his *affections* (v. 26—who do you love?), his *death to self* (vv. 27-32—how far are you willing to go?), and his *possessions* (v. 33—what possesses you?).

5.

The Great War of Genesis 14

We are backtracking a bit to Genesis 14 because the events in this chapter have a huge bearing on the conquest of Canaan. We have already noted that entering Canaan, Joshua came upon the remnants of the Rephaim and the sons of Anak, Amorites of great stature and strength (Amos 2:9).

In the days of Abraham, four kings from Mesopotamia entered the Jordan Rift Valley and attacked five kings (Genesis 14:2). These kings served Chedorlaomer for twelve years. In the thirteenth year, they rebelled, and in the fourteenth year, Chedorlaomer and his compatriots came against the rebels. However, before they could accomplish their original mission, they had to defeat the Rephaim, Emim, Zuzim, and Horites, all Nephilim from Bashan in the north to the Gulf of Aqaba in the south (vv. 5-7).

Strangely, few commentaries enlarge upon this unusual text. Why do they avoid the Nephilim war and focus only on the raid of Sodom? Some liberal scholars have suggested that the Nephilim account is an extra biblical addition by some later editor. However, those with a high view of Scripture cannot take that path; instead, they prefer simply to ignore the account. This was no small war and it covered a large territory. These Mesopotamian kings were successful against the races of giants. Clearly, the Lord used these kings to clear the way for Israel's entrance into Canaan some four hundred years later.

Having defeated the Nephilim, the kings of Mesopotamia turned north, defeating the Amalekites and the Amorites as well. Only then did they turn their attention on Sodom and Gomorrah. The battle in the Valley of Siddim (vv. 8-12) was a skirmish compared to the war they had just accomplished. The Jordanian kings were easily beaten, their cities plundered, and all the people were taken captive.

Among the captives was Lot, Abraham's nephew. Word came to Abraham who rallied his small personal army of 318 servant-soldiers and three confederates, Aner, Eschol, and Mamre, Amorites from Hebron. They pursued the retreating army to Hobah in Syria, north of Sidon, surprising the enemy at night, and defeated them, recovering the people and the plunder.

Two important developments arise from this event. First, Abraham encountered Melchizedek, who spread a banquet for him and blessed him in the name of the most-high God. The text focuses on the contrast between this forerunner of the Messiah (Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 5-7) and the selfish demands of the king of Sodom (note Genesis 12:3).

Second, God established His covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15). After the events of chapter 14, Yahweh visited Abraham in a vision. He commanded him not to fear. What did he fear? Perhaps he worried about retaliation from the Mesopotamian kings whose great prowess was demonstrated in the defeat of all the giants. He need not fear; The Lord would be his protection—his *shield*.

Also, in a clearly selfless act, Abraham refused to enrich himself at the expense of the Jordanian kings and he honored Melchizedek with a tithe of the plunder. The Lord Himself would be Abraham's reward. The lesson for us? Truly, the Lord is all that we need.

6.

Purging Iniquity

The five kings of Amorite cities who fled the battle at Gibeon (Joshua 10:1-15) hid themselves in a cave at Makkedah (v. 16). Israelite intelligence reported this to Joshua, who ordered the mouth of the cave guarded and blocked with stones. The main body of troops was to continue their pursuit of the fleeing Canaanites until they wiped them out. A remnant, however, escaped into fortified cities.

The pursuing troops returned safely to the new encampment at Makkedah (“a place of shepherds”). Joshua ordered that the cave be opened and the five Amorite kings brought out. Assembling all the men of Israel, he had the chief men come forward and place their feet on the necks of the humiliated enemies. This was an ancient custom that probably had its origin in the prophetic declaration of Genesis 3:15. The serpent’s head was to be symbolically crushed under the feet of the woman’s Son. This victory is described in the conquest of the greater Joshua, *Yeshua Mashiach* (Jesus Christ) in Psalm 110:1 and 1 Corinthians 15:25-28. Therefore, Joshua’s ceremony was more than a mere victory celebration after the Battle of Gibeon. The spiritual and symbolic importance of this ceremony illustrates the eschatological renewing of earth at the end of the ages. In the meantime, Canaan was to become God’s kingdom in which He would dwell in the midst of His people. Before His sanctuary could be established, evil had to be purged and all His enemies subdued.

As the chiefs of the people placed their feet on the necks of their enemies, Joshua encouraged them: “*Do not be afraid or dismayed; be strong and courageous. For thus the LORD will do to all your enemies against whom you fight*” (v. 25). Then Joshua put them to death and hung their bodies on trees until evening (v. 26). This act was to reinforce the fear of the Lord upon the people. These kings were under the curse of God (Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13). At sunset their bodies were taken down and buried in the cave in which they had tried to hide. Another monument was placed at the cave as a reminder of Yahweh’s faithfulness to Israel.

Verse 28 concludes this section with the conquest of the town of Makkedah itself. It, like every town in Canaan, was devoted to destruction. Every person in the town was to be killed. None remained.

One of the oft-repeated objections by critics of the Bible is that the genocide of the Canaanites makes God cruel and unloving. First, the objection fails to consider the extreme patience of God. The destruction of the Canaanites was His judgment on their idolatry and depravity. The Canaanite iniquity and rebellion was under His curse from the days of Noah (Genesis 9:25). In fact, God kept Israel under Egyptian affliction for 400 years until the cup of Amorite iniquity was full (Genesis 15:16). Indeed, God was very kind and patient with this rebellious people.

Second, the conquest of Canaan was a kind of dress rehearsal for the final purging of earth. Sin is an enemy usurper that must be removed before true righteousness and peace comes to earth when the true Joshua leads the final conquest (2 Peter 3:11-18).

7.

The Division of the Land

The conquest of Canaan involved two distinct stages. The first was the duty of Joshua as leader of the nation of Israel. He initiated the process with military might, defeating the strongholds and dividing the land. Remember that Canaan was not a unified nation but a hodgepodge of peoples of varying ethnicity, loyal only to their particular city-state. Joshua's task was to invade and subdue the major powers and prevent alliances to oppose Israel. In this phase Yahweh promised that He would personally defeat the inhabitants and drive them out. Joshua 14 ends with this declaration: "*And the land had rest from war.*"

The second stage involved the allotment of the land to the individual tribes. While Canaan was conquered, most of the territory remained in the hands of the original inhabitants. It was the duty of each tribe who inherited that lot to dispossess the people of it. However, the promise that God would drive out the people was still in force. Obedience did not require ability to perform, only willingness to act. This principle operates in the life of the believer today. While salvation frees one from the guilt and penalty of sin, the sinful disposition remains entrenched and must be expelled (Romans 8:13). That is the duty of each believer through the power of the Spirit.

Arthur Pink points out that two principles were involved in the process of possession that seemed to be mutually incompatible. The first principle to be followed was that each tribe's allotment was to be in proportion to the size of the tribe (Num. 26:53, 54). The second principle was that each tribe's inheritance was to be determined by lot (Num. 26:55). Thus, each tribe's inheritance would be determined by nothing but the sovereign pleasure of God who alone determined how the lot would fall. The wisdom of this arrangement cannot be admired too greatly. It glorifies God for His providential legislation of Israel's affairs while allowing no spirit of partiality to the larger and more powerful tribes or yielding room for the smaller and weaker to murmur and complain.

There were twelve allotments made to the tribes, but the tribe of Levi did not receive an inheritance. Joseph received a double portion. His two sons, Ephraim and Manassah, each received a tribal allotment. The distribution of each portion of the land to its respective tribe was then subject to apportionment to each family within the tribe. Thus, another law came into play (Lev. 25:23-28). This rule protected the rights of both rich and poor. If a man became desperate to survive, he could sell his parcel on a temporary basis until it was either redeemed or returned in the year of Jubilee. This prevented a person from permanently obtaining inordinate wealth by controlling the only real wealth, real estate.

These rules had other implications not immediately perceived. They promoted individual freedom and opportunity. They guarded against the propensity of the flesh either to indolent poverty and dependence or to selfish greed and personal advantage. It neither discouraged enterprise nor rewarded laziness. Yet, even more interestingly, it prevented the state from ownership of property and centralization of power.

8.

Partial Obedience

Israel was delivered from Egyptian bondage by God's great power. His purpose was to take His covenant son, Jacob, and, by extension in his progeny, the nation, and give them the Promised Land, Canaan, as their new Eden. It was a glorious land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Ezekiel 20:15). They did not have to fight for that land or dislodge its inhabitants, for the Lord fought for Israel and gave it into their hands. Their only duty was to take possession.

After his major invasion divided the land, Joshua continued his advancement to the south and then turned north. Israel defeated all the kings, devoted the people to destruction, but kept the spoils and livestock (11:14). Joshua did all the Lord commanded him (11:15).

Note that Israel made peace with no city save the Hivites of Gibeon. The reason for this success was that the Lord hardened the hearts of all the rest so that they fought against Israel (11:19, 20). Why didn't the Lord harden the hearts of the Hivites? Could it be that they stand as a token of God's purpose to save Gentiles from every corner of the earth?

Next, the record states that there were none of the Anakim remaining in the Land except those living among the Philistines. The Anakim were a family of Rephaim, one of several families of giants that once filled the land. Joshua defeated all the remaining Anakim (11:21, 22). Those who once paralyzed the people of Israel with fear and refusal to enter the land (Number 13:33) are now behind them. Caleb, one of the spies whose faith countered the discouraging report of his companions, asked for the very territory of the sons of Anak, Hebron (14:6-15; 15:13, 14). Satan's plan to keep Israel from the Promised Land, thereby defeating the Lord's plan to raise up the seed of the woman to defeat him (Gen. 3:15), failed. The Lord used the great war of Genesis 14 rid the east side of the Jordan of the giants. Now Israel finished the task on the west side.

Joshua 13 opens with the Lord's assessment that there was "*very much land yet to possess*" (13:1). He again promised that He would drive out the remaining inhabitants (v. 6). The land was to be divided and allotted to the various tribes for possession. Chapters 14-20 document that process. However, again and again we read words like, "*They did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer; so the Canaanites have lived in the midst of Ephraim to this day*" (16:10). The issue was not ability but will. They simply did not obey God's command to take full possession of the land. Why did they disobey? Moses warned them that Canaanite gods would be a snare to them (Deut. 7:16). Joshua also warned them to "*to love the LORD your God*" (23:11). Tragically, the gods of the Canaanites provided an irresistible allurement to Israel because the children of Israel never fully embraced Yahweh as the true and only God. They never put away the gods their fathers served in Mesopotamia and Egypt (24:14). The issue of the heart is always what god one serves.

9.

Canaanite Religion, Part One: Avoiding Idolatry

Joshua's final message to Israel was to challenge them to faithfulness to Yahweh. They were summoned to Shechem and there they presented themselves unto the Lord (Josh. 24:1). Joshua rehearsed the nation's history from the call of Abraham to the possession of Canaan (vv. 2-13). Then he exhorted: "*Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness*" (v. 14). To do this, they had to put away the gods that their fathers served in Mesopotamia and in Egypt. It seems rather strange that these objects of Yahweh's special attention needed to be told to avoid idolatry. After all, had not the Lord powerfully proved to them that He was the only true God? Did they not already recognize the impotence of the false gods of their fathers? The tragic history of Israel in the Old Testament reveals a fact often missed: syncretism. The borrowing of concepts and practices from other religions to mix with the theology and worship of other gods was common among the peoples of the day.

There is no clear picture of when the sons of Adam began to practice idolatry, and there is no biblical reference to idols before the flood. The first reference to "gods" other than the true God is found in Genesis 31:19. We do know that worship of idols occurred before Abraham in Mesopotamia (Josh. 24:2).

Shechem was the place Abraham built an altar to Yahweh when he first entered the Promised Land (Genesis 12:1, 6). That altar evidenced his choice to reject the gods of his fathers and to embrace the true God with his whole confidence. There is no indication that Abraham ever reconsidered his decision. Shechem is where Jacob, returning from Haran, ordered his family to surrender all the gods that they brought with them (Gen. 35:1-4). This surrendering of idols occurred upon the Lord's command for Jacob to go to Bethel and build an altar. In this God was asking Jacob also to give exclusive allegiance to Him. However, it should be noted that Jacob did not destroy but only "hid" the idols. Was this Jacob's way of keeping an open door to idolatry?

Exodus and Deuteronomy are filled with warnings and commands for the Israelites to avoid the religion of peoples who occupied the Promised Land (e.g., Exodus 23:13, 24, 32, 33). Joshua's final address to the nation focused on the same concern. There was a very great temptation to be drawn away from faithfulness to Yahweh to the more carnally attractive gods of their heathen neighbors.

What must be understood is that, in the minds of the people, one need not totally divorce one god in order to embrace another. It was not an either/or issue. When they made the golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai, Israel celebrated with a feast to Yahweh (Exodus 32:5). This thinking is a product of the natural inclination of fallen sinners who use religion to manipulate the gods for blessing or protection. Syncretism was thought to be acceptable to insure a desired result. Such thinking is not exclusive to ancient peoples. Are we not also susceptible to placing confidence in other things besides the Lord? "*Little children, keep yourselves from idols*" (1 John 5:21).

10.

Canaanite Religion, Part Two: The Father of Lies

The purpose of God is to restore righteousness on the earth by overthrowing the effects of Adam's fall through the seed of the woman (Christ). He will defeat the serpent (Gen. 3:15) but not without conflict (enmity) between the two offspring. The arena of this conflict is religion—the true versus the false. This is supported by Jesus who told the very religious, law-keeping, temple-revering Jews that their father was not Abraham but the devil (John 8:43-47). He is the father of lies. The religious leaders in Jerusalem heard only what came from their true father, the devil (John 8:38), therefore, they hated and rejected the true seed, Jesus.

The father of lies began very early to counterfeit God's plan to restore all things through the seed of the woman. This false gospel is said to be written in the constellations and tells that Adam was created in his present condition but was promised perfection through the son of a woman who would overthrow the usurper, Yahweh, and restore Satan, the serpent-dragon and to his rightful throne. A counterfeit always mimics the true.

In Genesis 10:8-11, we read of Cush's son, Nimrod ("rebellion"), whose mother was Semiramis. She is said to have later married her son, becoming the inspiration behind his ambitions. Another account has it that she was a prostitute in the inn she kept in Erech, the second city Nimrod conquered. She was later worshipped as the "queen of heaven" or Ishtar, pictured in the constellation Cassiopeia, (Jer. 44:17-19, 25).

Nimrod is described in Genesis 10:8 as a "mighty man" (Hebrew, *gibbor*; see Gen. 6:4). The term describes someone of unusual strength and ability. In Nimrod's case, "He was a mighty [*gibbor*] hunter *before* the LORD." The reference indicates something much greater than merely the taking of game in the field. The phrase, "before the LORD," can be rendered, "in the face of the LORD," that is, in rebellion against Yahweh. Also, verse 10 indicates that he was a kingdom builder, the first of which was Babel (Gen. 11:1-9). After the destruction of Babel, he built an empire of seven other cities, famous in history (Gen. 10:10, 11).

The religion of Semiramis is also described in various ancient legends. The most popular telling comes from Alexander Hislop (1806-1865), a minister in the Free Church of Scotland and outspoken critic of the Roman Catholic Church. (See *the Two Babylons*.) His version is that Nimrod was deified and ascended to heaven and became the chief God, El. Semiramis gave birth to a son after his death and named him Tamuz. When Tamuz went hunting, he was killed by a wild boar but after three days was raised from the dead and elevated to divine status.

The Babylonian cult of Nimrod forms the foundation of all idolatrous worship, affecting even the Jews. Nevertheless, the true God has prevailed through His Son, Jesus, who defeated Satan at the cross as promised (Gen. 3:15; Col. 2:13-15).

11.

Canaanite Religion, Part 3: Israel's Apostasy

The book of Judges depicts the apostasy of Israel and the seven cycles of discipline Israel experienced because of her sin. What exactly was the nature of that sin? *"They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth"* (Judges 2:13).

Five tiers formed the Canaanite hierarchy of deities. The top tier was occupied solely by the principle god called El, the strong god, creator of all. El was regarded as wise, holy, benevolent, and good. It is clear from this and the fact that El is never spoken against in Hebrew writings that, although corrupted, El is the Canaanite version of the true God. However, in Canaanite religion, El is often represented by an image, a thing clearly prohibited by Yahweh (Exodus 20:3-6).

El's work is carried out by lesser deities in the second tier of demigods. It is with these gods, the Baals and the Ashtaroth, that Israel sinned. These deities, though powerful, are easy to identify with as more "human." Baal means "owner-lord." He was worshiped under different aspects, such as sun, storm, fertility, health, and power. He protects and guards against powers of chaos and destruction.

Baal is sexual and has a consort, Ashtaroth. She is goddess of war, violence, and fertility. There are various forms of this female deity, but they all seem to reference the same basic goddess. She is also variously known as Anat, Ashura, Eshtar (the source of Easter), Aphrodite (Greek) and Venus (Roman). In some versions, she is the wife of El but also the consort of Baal. Although she engaged in licentious fertility rituals, she maintained her virginity.

The book of Joshua closes with Joshua's death after which Israel's descent into apostasy is suggested: *"Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua,"* implying that they stopped serving the Lord after Joshua's death (Joshua 24:31). This is confirmed in the book of Judges which opens with the angel of the LORD who speaks in the first person as Yahweh (Judges 2:1-5; see Exodus 23:20-33). He appears now to rebuke Israel for her failure and to say that for her disobedience He will not drive out the Canaanites but will make them thorns in their sides and make their gods to be a snare to them (Judges 2:3).

A second account of Joshua's death and burial (Judges 2:6-9) is followed by another assessment of Israel's failure: "And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel" (Judges 2:10). In other words, apostasy from Yahweh was consummated in two generations. Tragically, this failure was not for want of ability to finish the task (Exodus 23:30) but for a lack of willingness to faithfully obey the Lord (Judges 2:2).

We, too, are exhorted to *"continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel"* (Colossians 1:23). Although NT believers have greater privileges under grace, the warning still sounds: *"My beloved, flee from idolatry"* (1 Corinthians 10:14).

12.

For What We Are Looking Forward?

The Revelation is not an easy book to understand. First, it is full of symbolic language about real things. Second, the book does not read from beginning to end. Rather, it is a series of visions grouped for progressive parallelism or recapitulation. In other words, the visions cover the same events but from different perspectives. Thus, for example, the events of chapter 20 do not follow chronologically from chapter 19. Patient reading and observation will lead one to begin to pick out the patterns that mark the subjects as they appear in the different visions.

I believe that Revelation 20 summarizes the church age as seen from the perspective of hope for martyred saints. This is contrary to the dispensational interpretation that describes a literal thousand year reign of Christ on earth commencing at His Second Coming (chapter 19). Instead, Jesus, through John, used this vision to encourage the endurance of the saints as they faced the same antichrist world that put Jesus to death. The point of the vision is to demonstrate the blessedness of those whose lives were forfeited because they would not worship the beast, his image, or take his mark (v. 4). Instead of a horrible fate, these faithful believers were promoted to the glorious privilege of living and reigning with Christ. They were immediately and spiritually (not physically) resurrected to sit on thrones, ruling with the risen and exalted Jesus in the present age (see Rev. 2:10; 14:13). This picture is glorious, but just wait.

Revelation 21 and 22 record the establishment of the New Heavens and the New Earth after this present earth is burned up in the fire of God's judgment (see 2 Peter 3:10). The New Earth is the reality that we are to embrace with eager anticipation. Revelation 7:9-17 gives us a preview of that glorious age. First, it is to be populated by a great innumerable multitude from every corner of the earth. This multitude stands before God's throne clothed in white robes, symbolizing the righteousness of Jesus Christ (see Rev. 3:4, 5; 19:8). They hold palm branches, an allusion to Feast of Tabernacles, the Hebrew time of celebration of the harvest (Lev. 23:40, 43; Neh. 8:15). These nations are that harvest promised in the festival. Second, the branches symbolize their existence as a people redeemed by God and given the victory by God's hand over the enemy (like Israel over Egypt at the Red Sea). Third, the Feast of Tabernacles speaks of God's protection and provision like that of Israel in her wilderness wanderings (see Zech. 14:16-19).

These saints are said to come out of "great tribulation" (v. 14; Dan. 12:11). Rather than a time period (the last half of Daniel's seventieth week), the term describes the intense persecution that is to come on the churches near the end of the gospel age. Thus, those described in this text are the survivors of earth's final days. Oh, but look at the glorious experience that awaits them. Understanding this hope ought to drive us to be truly thankful for this and long for it with great anticipation (vv. 15-19).

13.

History of the King Maker: Part One: the Birth of Samuel

First Samuel one documents yet another story from the period of the Judges. The book records the establishment of Israel's first monarchy (about 1050 B.C.), taking the name of the last Judge and king-maker. Who authored 1 Samuel is uncertain but Samuel could very well have written at least some of the book (see 1 Chron. 29:29). Samuel served the Lord in Israel as prophet, priest, and judge for a number of years, bridging the period from the judges to the monarchy, anointing both Saul and David (in this connection, note the first appearance of the title "*Lord of Hosts*" in verse 3).

The account of Samuel's birth begins with a little background. "A certain man" was from *Ramathaim-zophim* (meaning "double height of the watchers," also known as Ramah) located in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Jerusalem, in the land of Zuph (9:5). It is interesting to note how the author first establishes the setting by noting Samuel's home town (see v. 19, 2:11; 7:17).

The "man" is identified as Elkanah (meaning "God has possessed" or "God has obtained"). His lineage is also listed. He was an Ephrathite (meaning "fruitful") who had a troubled (less than fruitful) house. He married Hannah (meaning "grace"); however, Hannah was barren. Having heirs was necessary to passing the inheritance of land on to succeeding generations. Marrying a second wife was a way to fix the problem (as was Levirate marriage). Thus, Elkanah married Peninnah (meaning "jewel"). A jewel she was, for she bore him many sons and daughters (v. 4).

Since God made the rules about the land's remaining within the tribes and clans of Israel, barrenness was considered a curse from God ("*the LORD had closed her womb,*" vv. 5, 6). Because of this, Hannah was treated scornfully by her rival, probably based on two things. First, although Peninnah blessed Elkanah with heirs, his first love was Hannah (v. 5). Second, Hannah's barrenness was seen as the consequence of some evil thing in her life that drew down the displeasure of God. (Note the connection between the provocations and the trips to worship at Shiloh, v. 7.)

The times of worship at Shiloh involved sharing portions of the sacrifices (vv. 4-6). This was a particularly difficult time for Hannah, for we read that although her husband loved her, he gave her but *one* portion. (The Massoretic text from which our English translation is made, has *double portion*; however, both text and context argue for "one," which is supported by the Septuagint, the Greek OT.) As a consequence, Hannah grieved her condition. To console her, Elkanah reasoned that he was better to her than ten sons (compare Ruth 4:15). While an effort to comfort, his is remark is a bit of self-inflation. Sons equated to security for a widow, the more the better.

How one handles trials demonstrates one's spiritual character. Compare Naomi, her bitterness and resignation, with Hannah's earnest seeking of the Lord. Trial's should not discourage us but drive us to seek God (Psalm 42).

14.

History of the King-Maker: Part Two: the Prayer of Hannah

The Law of Moses required that all males appear before the Lord for three major festivals at the tabernacle (Ex. 23:14-17). During this period (1076 B.C.), the tabernacle was located at Shiloh, about 15 miles north of Ramah, Samuel's home town. (To add a little perspective, Jephthah was judging from 1078 to 1072 B.C., Samson died in 1055 B.C., and Saul was anointed king in 1050 B.C.) Elkanah was a Levite (1 Chron. 6:22-28, 33-38) of the priestly Kohathite family originally dwelling in Ephraim; although Ramah, his home, was actually in Benjamin.

Elkanah regularly traveled to Shiloh to worship as prescribed. His bigamy, however, trends to accepted custom and clearly against Yahweh's revealed definition of marriage (Gen. 2:24), which prohibited all other deviations. It is customary with imperfect humans to accept tradition against biblical standards because they work in situations where strict obedience is difficult. Thus, while the law did not explicitly prohibit polygamy, it did strictly regulate it. As already noted in a previous lesson, taking a second wife in cases of barrenness was a practical remedy to provide sons as heirs, but it produced difficulties in the home between wives. This trend of pragmatic solutions to tough situations is to be resisted by true saints at all costs. The appearance of godliness without its true power is the curse of modern Christianity for this reason.

Hannah's grief over her barrenness was aggravated by Peninnah's provocations. This was not eased by her well-intentioned and loving husband who sought to counter her distress by giving her a "worthy portion." It only increased her distress. At issue was her very identity as a daughter of Abraham, which demanded that she bear a son and thus lend her part to fulfill the promised innumerable multitude of Abraham's seed (Gen. 15:5). Her trials were designed to drive her to seek her God for a miracle solution. God is the God of the impossible and the manifestation of His great power glorifies His name (Psa. 50:15).

Thus Hannah prayed before the tabernacle (vv. 9-13). But how long was her prayer? Notice that she rose up from the table to go to prayer and when finished, she returned to table to eat (vv. 9, 18). Yet, she poured out her heart in overwhelming emotion to God. She was not ashamed to vent her shame to the One who could grant her a remedy. Psalm 42 is a great reference for this kind of praying. Notice her prayer itself. She is humble, referring to herself three times as a slave of Yahweh (v. 11). She did not demand but requested and beseeched Yahweh, pressing the need and at the same time yielding to His sovereign will—*"if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son."* Lastly, her prayer was accompanied by a vow, common to OT times and regulated by the law (Num. 30:6-16). She promised to put her son in Yahweh's service to prove her motive selfless. Hannah's prayer provided the means the Lord sought to prepare Israel for her king.

15.

Hannah's Psalm of Praise

The story of Samuel begins with his mother's tribulation. This seems to be the typical pattern of God's dealings with His people. It is "*through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God*" (Acts 14:22). Hannah was barren, and this condition caused her considerable distress, especially due to the harassment heaped upon her by her rival, Peninnah, Elkanah's second wife (1 Sam 1:6).

Tribulation develops saints, as Paul understood (Rom. 5:1-5). The grace of God that causes one to rejoice in the hope of glory is the grace that first brings suffering. Gracious suffering shapes sinful character into godly character. This suffering produces endurance that leads to rejoicing hope. This was true of Hannah. Her suffering produced hope, hope that was realized in the man who would be God's agent to establish a monarchy in Israel. The same difficulties will attend David before he will wear the crown. God humbles His servants before He exalts them (see 2:7, 8).

God heard and answered Hannah's prayer (1:20) that she poured out in the agony of her soul before the Lord, and she delivered a son. She called his name Samuel, which means "asked of the Lord." That name would remind her that her God was good and worthy of all her love and devotion. Promising to "lend" Samuel to the Lord for his whole life, she prepared him and when the time came, she brought the young child to Shiloh and presented him to Eli, the priest for service in the house of the Lord (1:24-28).

Chapter 2 opens with Hannah's psalm of praise to God (2:1-10). Liberal Bible scholars have long rejected this beautiful Hebrew poetry as being a later addition to the text, written by a priest or scribe during David's or Solomon's reign. This idea was based solely on the mention of a king (v. 10), supposedly an anachronism since there was no king in Israel at that time. Even conservative scholars suggest that Hannah's prayer was expanded by a well-meaning scribe during the monarchy. Cannot God prompt this mother of a prophet to say what every Israelite who knew the Pentateuch expected (Deut. 17:14, 15; 28:36)?

This psalm of prayer and praise is much deeper than its surface reading might lead one to see. For instance, it is generally regarded that Hannah's mention of "my enemies" refers to Peninnah and others who made her life difficult (v. 1). Could this reference not be to the Philistines who would be subdued under David?

Certainly, the richness of the poetic language extends far beyond Hannah's personal difficulties as she attributes to God greatness that exceeds His answer to her prayer for a son, even as wonderful as that was. Somehow, Hannah understood that this boy was destined to exceed all her hopes and expectations. The Lord was about to do great things in Israel.

Note verse five: "*The barren has borne seven,*" reminiscent of the blessing given to Naomi (Ruth 4:15). Seven is the number of completeness and perfection. This theme of humbling before exaltation is a basic principle of Scripture (Matt. 23:12).

16.

The Contrast of Sons

Leaving Samuel in the care of Eli, Hannah worshiped the Lord for His gracious response to her desperate prayer (1:11-18). She offered up the powerful and insightful praise of thanksgiving in the beautiful psalm recorded in the opening verses of chapter 2. In it she observed that Yahweh will judge His adversaries in order to strengthen His king. The narrative shifts in verse 11 from Hannah's struggle resulting in the gift of Samuel to the divine purpose, the establishment of Israel's judge and prophet in order to begin the process of the judgment predicted.

The next section (vv. 12-21) reveals the condition of the priesthood at that time. Eli has two sons who are described as "worthless men" (*bâliya 'al*, something that does not conform to a right standard, so is of no worth, Prov. 6:12, 27; 19:28; Nahum 1:11; 2 Cor. 6:15; 2 Thess. 2:3). In this book the expression first appeared in 1:16, which suggests that it was the general condition of the people. Like priest, like people.

The root of their condition was that "*they did not know the LORD.*" Their hearts were not set on seeking the Lord, understanding His will, or what it took to please Him. They were self-servers, seeking to satisfy their fleshly appetites. Notice the very next phrase, "*The custom of the priests with the people was . . .*" (v. 13). They did not know or care for what the Lord revealed or required concerning the priest's portion of certain offerings. They took what they wanted, when and how it suited them. They had no regard for the Lord. The people even sought to caution them (v. 16). Yet, they rejected counsel and took the meat by force. "*Thus, the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the LORD, for the men treated the offering of the LORD with contempt*" (v.17). Gluttony is the first of the sons' sins that is condemned for which God's wrath will fall on this corrupt family of the Aaronic priesthood, the descendants of Abiathar (1 Kings 2:27). Service to the Lord driven by selfish motives and desires shows no respect for the things of the Lord.

Samuel is contrasted with Eli's sons in verses 18-21. This small section is bookended with two significant statements. First, Samuel is ministering "*before Yahweh,*" the narrator's way to highlight the contrast. Eli's sons served themselves; Samuel served the Lord. His godly family is, then, set in stark contrast to Eli's, and one can almost feel the storm brewing in the interaction between these two families. The section closes with Samuel's growing up in Yahweh's presence (21).

Eli's (and all the priests') responsibility was to walk with God (2:35), to render complete obedience to God (2:13), to discipline the flesh (2:29; 4:18), and to heed the warnings from God (2:27). Eli's failure in these important areas was magnified in his sons. As has been said, what fathers tolerate in moderation, children practice in excess. A conviction in the first generation is an observation in the second generation, but becomes a nuisance in the third. Oh, that God would keep us always a first generation people.

17.

The Real Issue with Eli's Sons

As we have previously observed, the narrator of First Samuel compares Samuel with the sons of Eli. The purpose of this comparison is to establish that God is about to create a new order and Samuel represents the expectation of that new order. The period of the Judges was a dismal display of human failure to put God into the supreme position which He, as God, deserves. Instead, Judges demonstrated the fickle and flimsy fruit of sinful man's efforts to rule his own kingdom. "*Every man did that which was right in his own eyes.*" There is nowhere that this trend is more evident than in God's priestly family, the sons of Levi.

Exodus 19:4–6 declares the fundamental statement of the divine plan for His covenant people. Israel became the first step in the progression to the full, perfect, and final realization of that purpose. The question is whether this plan was limited to Israel, or if Israel's role was to point to a far more comprehensive realization of the divine purpose. The answer to that question lies in the very nature of the priesthood as standing between the people who need God and God Himself. They were to be God's agents to bring men to God. Israel was called to be that kingdom of priests, a light pointing all the nations of the world to the one true God. As God was holy, so must those who represent Him be holy. In other words, to represent God properly, Israel must be like God in every way possible. To promote that obligation, God instituted three offices: priest, prophet, and king.

The duty of the priest was mediation and intercession in order to promote holiness, without which Israel could not be God's light in the world. In effect, the priests ministered in God's sanctuary in such a way as to invoke a proper fear of God through the display of His greatness in Israel's worship. But what do we read? These priests, the sons of Eli, did not even know the Lord (v. 12).

The very first impression of God that these men mediated was one of carnal fulfillment in excess (vv. 13-17). The offerings, designed to promote God's holy standards of righteousness and mercy, were treated with contempt by men whose real god was their own belly (Phil. 3:19).

The next section (vv. 22-25) shows that these priests not only indulged the flesh with food but further provoked Yahweh by adopting the pagan practice of temple prostitution. The text points to an official assembly of women serving at the temple's entrance. There is no such instruction from Moses regarding such an assembly, and that the priest's engaged sexually with these women argues for the pagan rite adopted into their worship (Acts 7:41). Eli condemned the practice as sin, warning that God's judgment was inevitable unless they repented and abandoned such activity. The narrator points out that Eli's lecture fell on deaf ears because God was about to put them to death (v. 25b). Is it possible that their deafness was increased by Eli's own self-indulgence (4:18)? However, the ultimate reason for this failure was God's purpose to bring in His ultimate Priest (2:35).

18.

A Man of God with a Message of Doom

Following Eli's lame attempt to rebuke his wicked sons for their folly, God sends an unnamed prophet to the priest with a message of judgment from God. Eli's sons did not listen to the warning of their father for two reasons: One reason is announced in the text; the Lord was about to end their lives. The second reason is found in the prophet's message from God: "*You scorn my sacrifices and my offerings . . . and honor your sons above me by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel*" (v. 29). Eli was just as guilty of degrading the priest's office as his sons were. They were not serving the Lord in their position; they were serving themselves.

The prophet's message began with a significant question: "*Did I indeed reveal myself to the house of your father when they were in Egypt subject to the house of Pharaoh?*" (v. 27). In a word, the Lord declared that the purpose of the priest's office was to show the God who revealed Himself. The Lord chose Aaron out of the tribes of Israel to be His priest, serving Him before the people. It was the priest's duty to display a holy God before Israel by the service of sacrifices (the holiness of acceptable approach to God) and appearance (holy garments representing personal holiness to reflect God—v. 28).

The judgment was not directed solely against Eli and his wicked sons but against all who descended from Ithamar, Aaron's youngest son. We are not told how Eli was related to Ithamar (comp. 1 Kings 2:27 with 1 Chron. 24:3) or how and why the priesthood passed from Eleazar's to Ithamar's line (note 1 Chron. 6:4-15; see also Numbers 25:10-13). E. Robertson writes that a Samaritan tradition the descendants of Ithamar seized the priesthood when Uzzi was rejected due to racial bias (*The Old Testament Problem*, 1950, p. 176). This family would now cease to exist due to the failing of Eli (name means "my God," note Matt. 27:46). The only one left, Abiathar, who escaped Saul's massacre of the priests (22:18-23), would spend his years grieving his ruined family.

The sign that this judgment was fulfilled would be the fact that Eli's two sons would both die on the same day (v. 34). In their place, God would raise up a faithful and reliable priest. In language similar to Deuteronomy 18:15-18, pointing to Samuel's place in the forward development of God's Kingdom, God declares that He will sovereignly do what sinful humans could never accomplish. Yahweh will build His faithful Priest a sure house and a perpetual priesthood (v. 35). This promise was later fulfilled in Zadok (1 Kings 2:35); ultimately, however, the language can point only to Christ Himself. (Note verse 36 and the fact that any survivors would beg a place to serve in order to get just a crumb of bread to sustain life. What sin enjoyed in abundance, judgment reduced to poverty.)

19.

A Prophet for the Times

First Samuel 3 opens with Samuel's call and commission to the office of prophet. Samuel is first compared to the faithless sons of Eli: "*Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD before Eli*" (v. 1). The emphasis is that Eli could not but take notice of the contrast. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the promise emphasized the establishment of a sure house (2:35). Samuel's sons did not follow the Lord (8:3). Still, the Lord declared that He would raise up a faithful priest and Samuel was pointing to that truth fulfilled in Zadok during the rule of David and Solomon, the Lord's anointed (1 Chron. 24:3).

The apostasy in the nation of Israel was desperate and critical. God was not talking to His covenant people. "*The word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision*" (v. 1b). While the people needed a faithful priest, they needed a prophet more. One cannot but notice the irony here. The tabernacle served as God's temple—His dwelling place among His people (Ex. 29:45; Psalm 132:14). Twice the tabernacle here is called "*the temple of the LORD*" (1:9 and 3:3). He was in the midst of His people, but their sin was so great that He would not speak to them! Does this resemble our day? Yet, Samuel's great contribution to the times was not to be the head of a priestly family but to be the spokesman of God.

The account of Samuel's calling is detailed in verses 2 through 15. It appears that, because Eli's eyesight was failing, Samuel was put in charge of trimming the menorah, the seven-branched lampstand that burned perpetually to light the sanctuary. To accomplish this task, Samuel slept in the sanctuary.

Again, we must take note of the imagery set forth here. The tabernacle was to serve as miniature version of the creation as it was meant to be before Adam's sin. The lampstand signified the light of witness and truth lighting up the darkness of that sacred space. Both the lampstand and the ark symbolized God's presence in the tabernacle, making it the temple of God. God was in the midst of His people, revealing Himself to them (Rev. 21:22-26).

In this setting, Yahweh chose to make Himself known to the young boy. He called to the youth three times, confirming that it was indeed the Lord (v. 8). Verse 7 is illuminating: "*Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.*" It conjoins two inseparable truths—that God cannot be known unless and until He has revealed Himself through His Word to us. Samuel knew of the Lord, but He did not know the Lord personally and intimately until He made Himself known. Do you know the Lord?

20.

The Word of LORD

We live in culture that, in an effort to promote an atmosphere of acceptance, has adopted a form of logic that literally contradicts itself. Each is encouraged to hold his own “truth” but never to impose that truth on any other. In other words, one must never judge others by his standards because another’s truth is just as valid.

Such a philosophy is based on the notion that there is no knowable truth, everything being considered relative. As a result, diametrically opposing opinions are considered equally valid. The product is nothing but confusion, as the mayhem in unfolding current events demonstrates.

1 Samuel 3 opens with the phrase, “*And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent [or published] vision.*” The culture of this period was much like that of today: “*Everyone did what was right in his own eyes*” (Judges 21:35). God’s Word had little or no influence on people’s beliefs and conduct. This is clearly evident in the way Eli and his sons conducted their lives. They were priests of God following their own rules. Practicing religion, even biblically established ritual, is not the same as obedience to the Word of God.

Eli believed in the Lord and ministered the sacrifices and worship of the tabernacle at Shiloh. However, Eli, unlike Samuel (v. 1), was not “*ministering to the Lord.*” He and his sons scorned (or “kicked at”) the offerings of the Lord by indulging themselves on the choicest parts of those offerings (2:28; see Jer. 5:5). In their pampered pride, they disregarded the laws regulating their share of the animals. They were ruled by passion and covetousness, not God’s will. Eli permitted this self-will (iniquity) by which they literally called curses upon themselves (v. 9). Being God’s high priest, Eli could and should have removed his sons from office. It was his duty to promote pure worship, but he honored his sons instead of the Lord. His failing eyesight was the physical complement of his spiritual condition.

God’s calling Samuel’s name three times in the night no doubt stirred the old man’s guilt-ridden conscience. The divine summons of the lad was a clear marker that the prophet’s message was coming to pass (2:27-36) and the old order was giving way to the new. Nevertheless, the old priest submitted, giving the lad proper instruction to respond to Yahweh when He called again.

The fourth time, “*the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times*” (v. 10). Samuel responded as Eli instructed (v. 11). His young and tender ears received a message from God that pronounced awful judgment against the man he had grown to love. He feared to tell his mentor the difficult news (v. 15). Nevertheless and because of Eli’s threats (v. 17), the whole message was shared. This was Yahweh’s test for his newly called prophet, confirmed in the verses following.

In spite of human culture to the contrary, God was moving forward with His undefeatable plan to rule all things through His Word. May we all, like Eli, graciously submit to that Word: “*It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him*” (v. 18).

21.

Overcoming Defeat

The tragedy of the period before us (1 Sam. 4 through 7) is the revival of mere religiosity devoid of the deep experiential trust and fellowship with God that results from true repentance. Religious people confuse symbols with reality. Isaiah wrote, *“This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men”* (Isa. 29:13). Israel’s sin, while different in its expression was essentially the same as that of Eli’s sons. Their religion was a mere externalism played out in heathen tones established on carnal pride. For this reason, God judged both the house of Eli and the nation of Israel by removing from them the symbol of His presence, the Ark of the Covenant.

The elders of Israel immediately understood that their initial defeat at the hands of the Philistines was due, not to any secondary causes, but to Yahweh Himself. Yet, they did not inquire of the Lord as to the reason for His displeasure. It never occurred to them that their sin was the problem. Thus, they presumed that victory was assured by the presence of a mere symbol and determined to bring it to the fight.

This approach to life is not confined to ancient Israel. Many professing Christians use the same logic. If one experiences spiritual defeat, the way to overcome that defeat is to renew commitment to some activity—Bible reading, prayer, church attendance, counseling, or perhaps, giving up something like TV-watching. This approach is good for the conscience but fails ultimately to restore real spiritual vitality. Only genuine repentance and whole-hearted seeking after God Himself will produce a proper solution. Only God’s Spirit can bring that about, and that destroys pride. Eli’s response to the prophetic messages pronounced upon him reveals this lack of true spiritual discernment: *“It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him”* (1 Sam. 3:18). It was a half-hearted resignation due to his own spiritual disinterest. How different was David’s response to Nathan’s word from God (Psa. 51).

It is the work of God that we are tracing in this narrative. Israel’s focus on externals, deliberate disregard for God’s standards, disobedience to His commandments, and open flirting with pagan idolatry became the very avenue of Yahweh’s plan to restore His kingdom on earth. The Israelite elders’ false presumption provided the means to fulfill His will to judge Eli and the priesthood. At the same time, God would judge the Philistines and inflict more damage upon them than Israel’s armies could do. Thus, we read, *“The hand of the LORD was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territory”* (1 Sam. 5:6).

To the discerning reader, the Philistines demonstrated an identical pattern of thinking as that of Israel. One need only observe the Ashdodites’ remedy for their affliction: *“The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us”* (1 Sam. 5:7). Would it not be better to abandon Dagon and sue Yahweh, the true God, for mercy?

22.

God's Heavy Hand

God is a God of justice. While His patience is very long, He will recompense judgment upon those who sin against Him (Deut. 7:23; Joel 2:13). He often uses third-party means to judge His own people after careful and prolonged warning (Jer. 7:25; 25:9; 26:5; 46:27, 28). This was true of his judgment on the house of Eli (1 Sam. 4; Jer. 7:12, 14; 26:6, 9). The Philistines were His agents to judge His sinful priests. Having done so, He turned His wrath on the Philistines, first defeating Dagon in his own temple at Ashdod (1 Sam. 5:1-5). Then, His hand (signifying His acts of might and power) was heavy against the people—“*He terrified [destroyed (KJV); ravaged (NASB); brought devastation on (NIV); Micah 6:13] and afflicted them with tumors*” (v. 6). The exact affliction here called *tumors* is probably lymph abscesses of the groin or possibly a hemorrhoid like abscess. The fact that it seems to be associated with a plague of mice (6:4, 5) also suggests that it may have been the bubonic plague common in the coastal region.

There were five city-states that composed the confederation of the Philistines in the south of Caanan on the coast of the Mediterranean: Ashdod, Gath, Ekron, Ashkelon, and Gaza. The Ashdodites complained to the five Lords of the Philistines assembled to evaluate the situation (v. 8). It was decided that the ark should be moved to Gath, a move which met with the same results, causing a very great panic. When the Lord afflicted the people of Gath, they sent the ark to Ekron but were met with loud protests (v. 10). Another meeting of the five *serens* or lords was called to answer the protest of the people of Ekron. Nevertheless, a deadly destruction spread throughout the city (v. 11; the ESV has “deathly panic”) killing many men and afflicting the rest to suffer from the horrible tumors (v. 12).

Seven months the ark remained in Philistia and the question persisted: “*What shall we do to the ark of the LORD?*” (6:1, 2). Everyone agreed it must be returned to Israel, but how was that task to be accomplished without inflicting further damage on Philistia? The priests of Dagon and the diviners were called to advise. This revelation emphasizes the level of disobedience that characterized the Philistines. Yet, they had no understanding of either the Creator’s expectations of them or of their failure in those expectations. As we stated before, the Philistines do not abandon their powerless and humiliated Dagon for the true God. They just want to get Him out of their lives. That is the true human condition with respect to God.

Without question, the level of thinking that permeates modern culture reflects the Philistine mindset. Having fallen under the judgment of God, as evident in the ceaseless barrage of bad news, the “lords” of the nation remain clueless as to the condition or the cause of the humiliation. Yet, the cries of men under judgment reach to the skies (v. 12) while they refuse to acknowledge the Lord in all things (Rom. 1:28-32).