

INTRODUCTION

This chapter closes the first section of the book of Samuel and first seven chapters have focused on Samuel as the Prophet, Priest who was also a Judge. It helps to bridge the gap between the period of Judges and the period of the monarchy with Saul soon to be appointed as the first King.

In this section God is really the centre character for He brought about the downfall of the nation's wicked leadership and has replaced it with Samuel his chosen leader for the next period of Israel's history. God has brought judgement upon the Philistines and upon Israel because of their treatment of the ark, which symbolised their treatment of him as God.

Now that the ark is back in Israelite territory you would think that things will improve but the reality is that although the ark is back in Israel the people of Israel are still far from God. The Philistine military threat is as serious as ever, nothing has really been resolved by the intervention of God, the Philistines still oppose Israel and Israel is still opposing God. But things are about to change as the rest of this chapter explains.

1. THE REPENTANCE OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL (vs. 2-4)

For 20 years the ark of God rests in Kiriath Jearim presumably without a proper tabernacle or without it being used in the way that it was designed and therefore it was not playing the central role that it ought to have played in the life of Israel. It would be about 90 years in total before David instructs the ark to be taken back to its proper place in Jerusalem and the worship of God is once again adhered to in the way that God commanded (2 Samuel 6).

Now the 20 years here is not the length of time the ark remained in Kiriath Jearim for as I have said it was there for 90 years but this 20 years is the period before Israel came to their senses and repented of their sin and turned back to the Lord as recorded for us in this chapter.

It is during this period of time that the people have a change of heart concerning God; we must assume that Samuel continued to minister God's word throughout this whole period of time as we are told that he spoke to "the whole house of Israel" (v 3). It seems that Samuel exercised his ministry from town to town and village to village bringing God's word to the people and now after 20 years there is a heart among the people for repentance.

I think that thought alone should encourage preachers to persevere in preaching God's word year after year for sometimes it takes years before people are given a heart for true repentance.

In the past the people of Israel had mourned because the Lord's hand was heavy against them in judgement (6:19) but now they mourn because of their sin and seek after the Lord (v 2). Samuel seizes the opportunity for he sees that the people are ready to genuinely repent and so Samuel tells them a number of things that actually instructs us about what true and genuine repentance is all about.

Samuel talks about "returning to the Lord" (v 3), which is the most important Old Testament expression for repentance. To return to the Lord implies acknowledging confessing and forsaking sinful behaviour. It is this repentance that makes it possible for Israel to be restored into a right and meaningful relationship with God once again.

God has been their God even during their dreadful waywardness and this is seen in his judgement upon the Philistines and upon the nation of Israel but the people were not living in a right relationship with their God and only genuine repentance could restore this relationship. Returning

to the Lord involves a turning from our sins, which has caused this separation and a turning to God who forgives and restores. It is worth reflecting upon the difference between mourning over sin and genuine repentance.

The people of Israel mourned in 6:19 because of the Lord's heavy hand upon them but they did not repent. You can even mourn over your sin and not repent. Repentance involves a turning to the Lord. You see it is possible for sin to have such heavy consequences upon us that we regret our actions and weep because of what has happened.

We may even feel sorry for our actions but that is not repentance because repentance involves turning to the Lord and having our lives changed. This is further seen by what Samuel says about returning to the Lord.

Now any returning to the Lord must by definition be wholehearted (v 3), a half hearted retuning will not do; that is not true repentance and when Samuel talks about the heart he is not thinking about emotions alone which is the way we use the word in English but he is thinking about their will for the Hebrew word for heart refers to the seat of one's intellectual commitment. Returning to the Lord and therefore repenting means committing oneself to the Lord and his word and ways.

But Samuel highlights three other characteristics that will accompany a returning to the Lord with all your heart. Someone who is genuinely repentant will do all three of these things for repentance is not mere words but it is active you do things when you repent. When you return to the Lord with all your heart you will first of all get rid of all other gods (v 3) the word translated "get rid" carries the idea of putting something down never to pick it up again.

The Ashtoreths were images of the Canaanite goddesses of love and fertility and so getting rid of such gods is a declaration that they were rejecting the Canaanite idea about fertility, which included certain sexual rituals that took place at the Canaanite shrines. Sex has a very powerful emotional appeal and so to give up such foreign gods would not be easy; but then true repentance is never easy.

However God demands that Israel worships no other gods for they are to be devoted only to God himself for you cannot worship the true God and false gods at the same time. God does not allow that to happen and will not accept worship from anyone who has other gods in their hearts for to worship God is to reject all other gods.

Samuel tells the people that returning to the Lord and therefore true repenting also involves committing themselves to the Lord (v 3). The Hebrew word means "to fix one's heart on something" and the idea is one of determination to remain loyal and faithful to God.

Now this commitment is logical when one returns to the Lord and therefore rejects all other gods then it stands to reason that one must commit one's whole heart to the God that we are returning to.

The next characteristic of repentance is to serve him only (v 3) and the idea behind the word "serve" is the idea of worship. Notice that they are to serve him only and this gets to the heart of Israel's religion for God requires exclusive devotion therefore to worship God along with other gods which is what Israel were doing is forbidden that is why they had to return to him and in returning they must be prepared to serve and worship him alone.

All the other nations like the Philistines had multiple gods that they depended upon in fact the more gods the better was their thinking but Israel has only one God and therefore must resist the temptation to adopt other gods along with their own God. God will not accept such a thing.

You either worship God with all your heart or you do not worship him at all; there is no half way house when it comes to God. Any repentance that still places hopes in other gods is simply not true repentance.

Samuel tells Israel that real repentance will result in deliverance from the hands of the Philistines (v 3). Samuel is looking beyond the political and military causes for Israel's situation and is pointing out to the people that their defeats are related to their relationship with God. The nation had failed because its leadership was corrupt and the people had abandoned God for other gods.

Therefore if their nation is to have a future then they must repent which involves getting rid of other gods committing themselves to the true God and worshipping him only. But will the people repent? Well verse 4 tells us clearly that they do, Samuel's preaching has been effective and the Israelites are now back in a right relationship with the covenant God.

Now these opening verses of this chapter teach us an important lesson about genuine repentance. Repentance is often misunderstood in our world and mistaken for remorse or sorrow. We can think that because someone is sorrowful because of what they have done or someone feels remorseful for their actions that they are repentant.

Biblical repentance is primarily a radical turning to God as the only true God, which also involves us in turning away from our sin and from other gods that we entertain in our hearts. We rarely think that in the modern church anyone or even a whole church may be guilty of idolatry but sadly idolatry is probably one of the common sins of the modern church for we often worship God and other things and people as well.

Others steal our devotion and our love and as a result we have other gods that sit alongside the one true God. Therefore we must repent of such sins and commit ourselves exclusively to the Lord our God. It is human tendency to turn away from the Lord God to other pathetic gods of this world; we can easily neglect our relationship with him in order to grasp a moment of earthly pleasure.

That's what happens when Christians fall into the sin of adultery, they worship the god of sex alongside the true God. When Christians are found guilty of financial mismanagement they are showing that the god of money and materialism sits alongside the true God in their hearts and such a thing is not acceptable to God and must be repented off.

Christians can be guilty of having this pattern of idolatry in our hearts were we constantly go after other gods in order to find a few moments of what we consider to be pleasure. But Samuel calls upon us to repent of this pattern of sin, a pattern that embraces the worldly life of idolatry, a pattern that seeks to find meaning in any other way besides living in harmony with the true God and with him alone.

It is no wonder that the church today knows little of God's blessing when the sin of idolatry is sadly so common. It is always easier to go through religious routines even good ones like church attendance and bible reading or prayer etc than it is to face up to one's sins and repent. But repent we must if we are going to live in close fellowship with the God who saved us through Jesus Christ. Sin is so serious and its results so disastrous that Jesus had to come and deal with sin through his own death.

Death was the only effective means of dealing with sin and if God takes sin that seriously that it costs him his Son then is it not about time that we took it more seriously than we do. When was the last time that we repented of our sin?

I did not ask when was the last time we felt sorry for our sins or were remorseful. But when did we repent in the way described in these verses? You see repentance is not a one off thing whenever

we came to faith in Christ, repentance is a way of life. The more we grow in grace and the more we become like Christ then the more aware we become of our own sin, especially the sin of idolatry then the more we see our need for genuine repentance.

In the world in which we live there are many attractions that could easily become the object of our love and therefore may become to us a “foreign god” to use Old Testament language. Anything or anyone that interferes with our relationship with God is an idol and must be repented off. The good news is that genuine repentance brings deliverance that is deliverance from the guilt and forgiveness for all our sins. Genuine repentance always leads to genuine forgiveness. So no Christian needs to live a life of guilt, we can be guilt free by genuinely repenting of our sins and by returning to the Lord with all our heart, committing ourselves to him and worshipping him alone.

Perhaps there is someone here today who has never repented. You have been sorry on many occasions and remorseful on a few occasions; but you have never repented of your sin especially your sin of idolatry, you have never turned to the Lord. Then you can do so tonight, and if you do, then you will receive the forgiveness that God alone grants through his Son Jesus Christ who lived and died that we may be forgiven.

Will you do that? I trust God will enable us all to genuinely repent and return to the Lord.

Amen