

Charles Price - Pastor and Leader's Day

January 25, 2007

Session One

I enjoy being in Canada. If you compare ages, it feels like Britain is 65 and collecting its pension. Canada feels like its 25 and just coming into its prime. I love the diversity of Canada.

I'm not qualified to be here since I've only been here five years. I think it's easier to be a pastor of a large church than a smaller one. I just have to lead the staff team and preach. Pastors of smaller churches have to be a jack of all trades.

The theme of today is staying fresh with God. Turn to 1 Samuel 1.

Often it's easy to miss the whole point. One of the easiest places to do this is the Christian ministry. We get caught up in programs and routines and ministries and miss the point. My job isn't to bring people to Christ. My job is to bring Christ to people so they see his attractiveness. It takes the pressure off because he draws people to himself.

1 Samuel records the transition of Israel from a theocracy to a monarchy. In a theocracy, he raised up men and women who were the military leaders. They were appointed by God and recognized by the people.

But by 1 Samuel, people had gotten weary of that. It was a messy and unpredictable system. When you have to wait for God to raise someone up, he doesn't always do it soon enough for people's liking. They wanted to be like other nations, which is a pressure we face. They wanted a king.

In the first three chapters, we find a pathetic spiritual atmosphere centered in Shiloh. The spiritual life of the people was in the hands of a priest and judge named Eli, along with his two sons. "Word from the Lord was rare in those days; revelatory visions were infrequent." (1 Samuel 3:1) People heard the voice and activity of the priest but not of God.

To illustrate this barrenness, Hannah comes to the Temple and prays with God for a son. Eli saw her and assumed she was drunk. It's pathetic that when a woman is crying out to God, the priest assumes she's drunk. We know how the story goes. Samuel is born, goes into Eli's household, and hears God's voice. Later on, when Samuel hears God's voice, Eli thinks he's dreaming. No wonder it says the word of the Lord was rare. No expectancy, no sense of hearing God, just cynicism and unbelief.

He had two sons who joined him. “The sons of Eli were wicked men. They did not recognize the Lord’s authority” (1 Samuel 2:12). The priesthood had become a good job with nice benefits. They got free meat and free sex. Eli tried to intervene but wasn’t heard.

How does the priesthood get into this kind of mess? I imagine when he was called by God, he was very excited. Nobody intends to go into the ministry and get here. It’s so easy for our Christian ministry to become a form and routine but without any sense of spiritual reality or walking with God.

I talked to a pastor who’s been in the ministry 30 years. He asked, “How does a person hear from God?”

Spiritual language can easily become a substitute for spiritual life.

I counted up the sacrifices they offered. I counted 1,274 mandatory animals a year plus many voluntary sacrifices. They were up to their arms in blood. But the power isn’t found in the ritual; it’s in the thing to which the ritual points. The first check I got was for a million pounds, but it had no power because there was no money in the account. The sacrifices was like a post-dated check drawn on Calvary. He was saying to all of history, “There is cash in the bank; the checks can be drawn.”

The ritual signified the worshiper’s repentance. There was no value in the blood of animals themselves. On the part of God, the ritual was a token of his holiness. He couldn’t just accept sin. The holiness of God demanded the shedding of blood.

They engaged in the ritual, but they lost the reality. Instead of the reality pointing to the reality, it replaced the reality. We either desecrate the ritual or we deify the ritual.

The ritual can become the reality in our minds. Example: the symbols of the New Testament, like the Lord’s Supper or baptism. We can become superstitious about the bread and wine. It’s like my wedding ring. It’s a symbol. Taking off my ring doesn’t make me unmarried. It’s a symbol that points to a reality. All too often we can practice the ritual but lose the reality that the ritual points to. This can happen with Bible reading too. Jesus even criticized people for studying the Bible because they missed the point of Bible reading (John 5:39-40). The point of studying the Bible is not to learn about the Bible but to get to know Christ. “Beyond the sacred page, I seek thee Lord.” If you detach the Living Word from the sacred word, it’s just a book. The Bible isn’t the truth; it bears witness to the truth, just like an airline isn’t truth but it bears witness to the truth which is what happens with the aircraft.

Through the prophets, God spoke against this type of thing. He tired of worship that was detached from reality.

In ministry, I always ask, “What is God doing?” We need to do our part, but how are we acting as a conduit of what God is doing? In what you’re doing, what is the connection with God? Before I preach, I recognize the only thing I have to offer is what God does.

The most important thing about what we do isn't the consequences but the cause. We need to measure things by their cause. We are here because God has called us here, and we are ministering in his power. If we measure things by consequences, we tend to manipulate the consequences. We measure the wrong things. Nobody ever prayed to become a Christian in the New Testament. The evidence is not that somebody prayed a prayer, it's repentance that leads to changed lives.

This pathetic situation in 1 Samuel is a worst case scenario for us. I'm sure Eli didn't aim to end up like this. In all of our busyness and activity, what is there that has no explanation except that God is doing something? Everything that happened in Shiloh could be explained by human activity. What can only be explained by God?

Session Two

1 Samuel 4:1-3

Israel is in combat with the Philistines, on the southwestern border. They have defeated the Israelites and killed four thousand. They had the idea to bring the ark to help them in battle. It had worked before.

But Israel hadn't tried this lately (v.7) which says something. They took the ark to battle, but Israel was still defeated. Israel was slaughtered and the ark was captured.

Meanwhile, back at Shiloh, Eli dies and a baby is born named Ichabod, "the glory has departed."

It's a tragic story caused by a simple issue. In Joshua 3, it was God who was acting. The ark was the symbol of his presence, but in 1 Samuel, God was not present. They had the symbol but not the reality.

When we reduce the Christian life to a program that does not require divine presence or activity, we have killed it dead. That's a picture of what happens here.

We try to replicate patterns. Patterns can never capture God's presence or initiative. When we try to replicate patterns, copying other churches and programs, we end up doing what Israel did: we focus on the pattern and not the presence and initiative of God. God writes Ichabod.

We follow the pattern and we somehow think that the pattern has power.

There is nothing wrong from learning how God moves with others, but when the patterns become the objects on which we depend, they become a substitute for God. Whereas forms and patterns become important to us, the form cannot be separated from the reality. Whenever Jesus expected people to follow a pattern, he broke that expectation.

The serpent on a pole: what started as a symbol of God became a substitute for him.

God blessed the Philistines when they had the ark. He showed his presence and power by the mess that followed wherever the ark went.

There is a difference between putting our faith in the ark and putting our faith in him.

Which word most describes you and your ministry: Ichabod, God has departed - we have all the techniques but not God's presence? Or Ebenezer, God is helping us.

It's not either/or. It's God in me. The worst sermons are the ones that I think are good. The best are those when I know I need God's help. We need to learn all the techniques we can, but they only become powerful when our dependence is in God himself.

Satan's technique is not only lead us into open sin. It's to lead us to do the right things in self-sufficiency.

Session Three

1 Samuel 8

Eli is long gone. Samuel passes on the baton to his sons and appoints them as judges, which he shouldn't have done.

The people wanted a king because of Samuel's mistake but also to be like the other nations (19-20). They were tired of being unique.

There is a cult of relevance today. This was a cry for relevance. However, God gave them a king. He's impressive and has all the right qualifications.

“At this time tomorrow I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin. You must consecrate him as a leader over my people Israel. He will save my people from the hand of the Philistines. For I have looked with favor on my people. Their cry has reached me!”

Saul anointed, presented to the people, anointed.

God chose him; God called him; God changes his heart and came upon him in power; Saul proved God's presence and power in his life. By the time we get to the end of chapter 11, the story is very good.

But we know Saul's story is not one of victory but of defeat. He was the right man for the job, so what happened?

The only promise God made was that he would deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines, who wanted to deprive Israel of their inheritance. This never happened, although there was lots of opportunity. There was constant war between Israel and the Philistines during Saul's reign. Saul eventually died in battle against the Philistines. It's a tragic story.

We can have a sense of call and vision from God. We can move out in that direction. But we don't see these dreams come into fulfillment.

There are three battles where we read about Saul in battle: 13, 17, 28-31. In each of these battles, the one characteristic is fear (13:5; 17:11, 24; 28:5). We only have three battles required, and Saul was afraid in each of them.

What is fear? It's an emotion we feel when we face something that threatens us and that is bigger than us and our resources. Story: when I was out for a walk and encountered an elephant.

Saul was afraid because he believed the Philistines are bigger and stronger than he is, and his resources. Chapter 13: Saul chose 3,000 men; they have 3,000 chariots, 6,000 charioteers, and innumerable soldiers. The fact that God had made a promise is completely irrelevant to his thinking.

In Saul's case, despite the promises of God, he's living by his own wits and resources. Are you? We often try, but it's not enough.

In chapter 17, it's the size of Goliath that scares him. This was the golden opportunity for Saul to deliver Israel, but he doesn't. David comes as a shepherd, too young to be a soldier. David said an important thing to Saul in 37: "The Lord who delivered me from the lion and the bear will also deliver me from the hand of this Philistine!"

David knew that if a lion got a sheep, it would be back for more. David relied on God's help to be a good shepherd. David is alone, no audience, just doing the right thing and proving God. He knew God would deliver him. David has a private history in which he has learned that God will intervene.

Do you know why some of us are unable to cope in the big crises? Because we have never been able to cope in the small crises. What goes on in public will be real, authentic, and godly only if it is an iceberg of trust built on what is real, authentic and godly below the surface where nobody is watching.

The most important things that go on in your ministry are not the things that people see.

We can be a Saul or a David. We have a history of experience with God. Saul had a memory of God but nothing up to date. He had no current experience of God, only jargon (37). He was living by his own wits and abilities.

We can be David. We can step out with a confidence that is not in ourselves, living in reliance on divine enabling. When David trusted God, people joined him (52). For 40 days they had been lying intimidated. People are waiting to serve God but are waiting for an example. The secret to getting people excited about God isn't teaching them well; it's about being excited about God. "I want to know God like they do." Hebrews 13:17 - not imitate what they teach; imitate their dependence on God.

When you see a movie when the sound is out of sync, people never say, "Why is the action fast?" They say, "Why is the sound slow?" What they see speaks more than what they hear.

People also hated him for it (18:8). Saul resented David. He became jealous and afraid. He is hated because he let God be God. If you let God be God, there's no way around it: people will hate you for it. We are going to be like sheep among wolves. Those who live godly lives will be persecuted; that's a promise. But don't take it personally.

David doesn't try to get rid of Saul. He recognizes Saul as God's anointed. He lets God take care of things. Just trust God.

In our ministries, God will be at work. We don't always see it right away. If you serve God, it is impossible for nothing to happen.

Is it ritual or reality? Is it Ebenezer or Ichabod? My question this session is: does Saul or David characterize me?

Session Four

1 Samuel 16

There is some question about chronology. In this chapter, God reveals that he has rejected Saul and chosen David. We need to read 16:1 in light of 15:23, as a result of Saul rejecting the word of God.

We are all as close to God as we want to be. God doesn't initiate withdrawal.

2 Chronicles 15:2 - The Lord is with you when you are loyal to him (or when you are with him).

There comes a time to stop mourning people who have stepped out of the will of God. Where you are is where you chose to be. Don't be paralyzed by other people's disobedience.

Instead, God says, I have an alternative. *God often picks from the bottom of the pack.* I used to think that there was a kind of person God chose and I didn't measure up. One day I realized I'm just what God described in 1 Corinthians 1:27-28 - weak, foolish, etc.

The issue is the heart. "God does not view things the way men do. People look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (16:7)

What is God looking for?

ONE: A person after God's heart does not make his own plans. He does everything God wants him to do (Acts 13:22); Saul does not. We'll never be a person after God's own heart until our will has been broken. David continually inquires of the Lord. David didn't see himself as an authority; he saw himself as under authority. *The key question today*

continues to be: What is God's agenda? David continually calls himself a servant. It's great to be a servant: the responsibility is somebody else's.

Let me say a few words about the will of God. It's not something you have to orchestrate. God directs your paths. It's part of the package of the Christian life. We don't have to get ourselves in the will of God; our default position is that we live in obedience, we are in the will of God. He hasn't given us principles or riddles; he's given us the Holy Spirit. The Spirit puts a compass in our hearts. Psalm 37:4 - God gives us our desires; the desires of our heart will be God-given desires. "Love God and live as you please." Have you ever considered that your will and God's will could be the same thing? God is our Creator in time before he is our Savior. Every major decision in my life, I've faced doubt. We're more sure of the will of God in retrospect, because we walk by faith and not by sight. Go down the road. Don't go looking for green lights; just accept the red lights. Don't worry if you go off track; God will guide.

What are the implications of God having an agenda for his life? That you'll often go into territory that is beyond your human capabilities (23:2-4). We prove God when we go beyond human resources.

Never ask as your first question if something is possible. Ask if it is right. There are many things that are possible that aren't right. When you sense something is right, step out whether it looks possible or not.

It's like when Jesus challenged Philip re: feeding the crowd in John 6:5: "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" Philip was a professing Christian but a practical atheist. Any atheist would have answered the question the same way. We should not ask what is possible; we need to ask what is right.

TWO: A person after God's own heart does not manipulate his own purpose. He or she allows God to work out his own timing. Twice, David had the option to destroy Saul. Jesus faced the same temptation to go ahead of God's timetable.

We find peace when we leave the timing up to God. Do the right thing but wait on God's timing.

THREE: A person after God's own heart doesn't manufacture his own power. David recognizes his own weakness, and battles Goliath in God's strength.

In 1 Samuel 18:17, Saul makes a remarkable confession of his lack of dependence on God. He believes that if David fights God's battles, he will die.

David, on the other hand, relies on God. He never asks God to give him strength; he says the Lord is his strength. I could go to Air Canada and ask them to make me fly. They can't make me fly but they can fly me. In the same way I can be carried by God's strength.

Obedience and dependance go hand in hand. A key verse in my life is 1 Thessalonians 5:24: "The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it." Because David lived like this, all the remaining kings in Judah were compared in their obedience to David. May we learn to live like this too.