

## “What Do You Do with an Ashtoreth?” – 1 Samuel 7:2-4

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### A. Alex

1. Not longer after I'd come back to the Lord 30 years ago, one night at work I was talking with Alex about God.
2. I was pretty fired up with all I'd been learning at CCCM & was just asking him what *he* believed.
3. Having run in to some other Jesus Freaks from CC, he knew where I hoped to steer the conversation so he told me of his strong resistance to Christianity.
4. His chief objection was that everyone he'd known who'd become a Christian had done so at a time when their lives were falling apart.
  - a. That seemed fairly reasonable to me so I asked, “Yeah, so?”
  - b. His reply was – *if* God was really worth believing in & following, wouldn't it be good for when things were going well too?
  - c. Now, I wasn't following his line of thinking & told him; so he explained . . .
  - d. If God is real, then He's there *all the time*.
    - 1) So why don't people come to faith when things are going *well*?
    - 2) Why do they only convert when life's a mess?
    - 3) Why not come to faith when things are rosy?
5. He saw this as a fatal flaw in the offer of the Gospel.
6. Here's what I tried to help Alex see that night . . .
  - a. First, his experience with people who'd converted was pretty narrow.
    - 1) There have been *many* who've come to faith from simply hearing the Gospel preached.
    - 2) The Books of Acts has lots of conversions that way.
    - 3) In modern times, this is what happens in thousands of villages around the world where missionaries work.
  - b. But at the same time, it's *true* many *do* come to faith out of desperation.
    - 1) For some it *takes* a serious *breaking* before they're willing to admit their need.
    - 2) They sense no real need of a Savior as long as they think they're the captain of their ship, the master of their own fate.
    - 3) It takes the sobering effect of a severe trial to reveal that they aren't as together & self-sufficient as they've thought.
7. In a moment of brilliant enlightenment, I challenged Alex, “God *is* worth coming to faith in when things are fine. So why don't you, right now?”
  - a. He waved his hands; “No way!” he said, “That's my point, I'm NOT interested now!”
  - b. So I said, “Okay; you've just *proven* you're one of those who will *only* come to faith by realizing you're *not* sufficient in yourself.”

#### B. Israel's Mode

1. Alex was like ancient Israel at the time of the Judges; the time we're reading about here.
2. Samuel was the last Judge & Israel was once again suffering under the harsh hand of foreign oppressors, the Philistines.
3. They'd defeated Israel in a major battle we read about in ch. 4.
  - a. Israel had lost 34,000, the high priest & his sons had died, & worst of all, the ark of the covenant had been captured.
  - b. The Philistines took the ark as a trophy of their conquest back to the temple of their main deity Dagon,

- c. Where they proceeded to learn some dramatic lessons about the power of Yahweh – the God of Israel.
  - d. Realizing the plague that was destroying their land was the hand of God, they sent the ark *back* to Israel.
4. It ended up at the home of a priest named Abinadab, in the city of Kirjath Jearim.

## **II. TEXT**

### **A. V. 2**

**<sup>2</sup>So it was that the ark remained in Kirjath Jearim a long time; it was there twenty years. And all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD.**

1. The reason the ark remained at Abinadab's house instead of being returned to Shiloh where the tabernacle had been was because it had been destroyed by the Philistines 20 years before.
2. The priests had rescued the *furnishings* but not the tabernacle itself.
3. So now there was no central place of worship.
4. And for 20 years the Philistines brutally dominated Israel.
  - a. As each year passed, the oppression become more intense.
  - b. Finally, realizing they were experiencing God's discipline for turning away from Him, they began crying out for His help.
5. This turn back was the fruit of Samuel's faithfulness in traveling the length & breadth of the land,
  - a. Reminding them of the covenant their ancestors had made with God.
  - b. Ch. 3 tells us Samuel's reputation as a prophet became well known throughout the entire nation at this time.
  - c. He reminded them of the Words of Moses, who in Deut. 6 had said . . .

**<sup>13</sup>You shall fear the LORD your God and serve Him, and shall take oaths in His name. <sup>14</sup>You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are all around you.**

- e. God warned them repeatedly through both Moses & Joshua that if they turned from Him to idols, He would correct them by removing His protection & opening the door to foreign oppression.
  - f. The Book of Judges tells us of repeated cycles of Blessing, Spiritual apathy, Idolatry, Judgment, Oppression, Repentance, Deliverance at the hands of a Judge,
  - g. Then it starts all over again with a new generation that forgets about God & takes the blessing for granted.
  - h. What we're reading here is the *last* of those cycles & Judges.
6. Samuel has made it clear that Israel's distress is the result of her turning from the worship of Yahweh to idols.
7. And now the people are *united* in their grief over having turned from God.
  - a. There was a collective sense of, "*What have we done?*"
  - b. "No wonder we're distressed & oppressed! We've played the fool & forsaken the one true God."

### **B. V. 3**

**<sup>3</sup>Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel**

1. When?
  2. Once he saw widespread conviction of sin & a genuine desire to make things right with God . . .
- <sup>3</sup>Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, "If you return to the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from among you, and prepare your hearts for the LORD, and serve Him only; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines."**

3. This was the test to see if the people were *genuinely repentant* or *merely regretful*.
  4. If they *really* want to return to the Lord, there's *action* they need to take.
    - a. Their devotion to God isn't just some private, emotional *feeling*.
    - b. If their hearts are right with God, it'll produce some specific behavior.
    - c. And one of the *first things* it will produce is the rejection of idols.
  5. Samuel tells them the way *back to God* is paved with a whole-hearted dedication to Him that reserves nothing & takes steps *away* from the sin they're repenting of.

**"If you return to the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from among you, and prepare your hearts for the LORD, and serve Him only;**
  6. By *servicing* God, Samuel means *worshipping* Him.
  7. By serving Him *only* - Samuel was making clear that devotion to God is *total*, 100%, whole-hearted.
  8. God will not consent to be just one of many masters over us.
    - a. He's jealous & brooks *no competition* for our affection.
    - b. Yahweh is not some idol we set on a shelf among others.
    - c. He claims *sole possession* of our hearts.
  9. And true repentance must turn to action;
  10. They are to go home & take the idols of Baal & Ashtoreth they have in their household shrines, & destroy them.
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11. *Baal* was the god of prosperity & power.
  12. *Ashtoreth* was his female consort who held power over fertility & sex.
    - a. The Canaanites believed it was the sexual union of Baal & Ashtoreth that led to the fertility of their fields & herds.
    - b. Abundant crops & flocks meant more money which meant access to both power & pleasure.
  13. So in order to entice Baal & Ashtoreth to "get busy," the Canaanites practiced all sorts of perverse sexual rites in public before their altars & shrines as a kind of "*religious pornography*."
    - a. But the *real result* was the violation of wedding vows; jealousy -
    - b. Broken hearts, broken marriages & families. The spread of disease.
    - c. And an epidemic of *sexual dysfunction* as people could no longer enjoy the blessing God intended a husband & wife to have in their physical intimacy.
    - d. Their perversions destroyed their ability to be satisfied & enjoy a normal husband & wife relationship.
  14. **THIS** is why God describes Himself as *Jealous* –
    - a. It's not because He's insecure & *needy* of our love & loyalty;
    - b. **We are!** We're the one who need to be loyal & obedient to God.
    - c. When we are, *life works* as it's supposed to & we get to enjoy the maximum experience of pleasure without an ounce of guilt or loss.
    - d. God is jealous **FOR OUR SAKE**, not His.
    - e. He loves us so much, He wants to make sure we experience *all the good* without *any of the bad*.
    - f. He knows that while sins promise pleasure, its end is always pain.
  15. So Samuel told them to remove from their lives all that stood in the way of whole-hearted devotion to God.
    - a. But they needed to do *more* than just clear their *houses* of idols.
    - b. They needed to make sure their *hearts* had been cleared out to: "Prepare your hearts for the LORD" he said.
    - c. Don't just toss out your Baals & Ashtoreths; dismantle that altar in your heart that secretly longs for sin.
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16. I shared last week that in my young adult years I had a really nice component stereo system & a lot of albums.
  - a. I loved rock & for a few years was not walking with the Lord.
  - b. Some of the bands I liked played up the dark & demonic side of rock & roll.
  - c. Drugs was a big part of that whole scene.
  - d. When I came back to Christ, I struggled with some of the sins of my past.
    - 1) I'd discovered some bands & music that was about God & was edifying to listen to,
    - 2) But I was also still listening to my old albums.
    - 3) I'd listen to *Gentle Faith*, then put on a *Black Sabbath* album.
  - e. One day I read in Acts 19 how when the Ephesians came to faith they gathered up all their occult books & burned them.
17. So I took my entire collection of raunchy music, with a bit of reluctance, I might add, & tossed it in the dumpster.
18. That act marked a major turning point.
  - a. Watching those albums spill into the waste bin filled me with a joy that moved me to go through my entire house, looking for *whatever* else ought to be jettisoned.
  - b. It was like those records were spiritually tied to something in my heart,
  - c. And as they fell into the trash, they pulled the darkness inside me along with them.
19. Baal & Ashtoreth were merely symbols of the lust for power & pleasure.
  - a. They were a way to bypass the conscience & make sin socially acceptable.
  - b. Baal & Ashtoreth were just convenient masks for *self* – for defining life apart from God.
20. Idols of Baal & Ashtoreth aren't in vogue today.
  - a. We don't have any *Baal Boutiques* or *Ashtoreth Arcades* where you can pick up an idol.
  - b. But the lust for & worship of power & pleasure goes on in even greater proliferation today than then.
21. Whenever the goal of life becomes *the next thing* -
  - a. The next experience, high, promotion, vacation, thrill
  - b. The next car, house, relationship
  - c. Then really – we're worshipping an idol called Self!
22. The essence of life, the goal of living is to Love God with *all* our heart, soul, mind, & strength.
23. If only we would remember that in *His presence* is *fullness of joy* & at His right hand are *pleasures forevermore*.

## C. V. 4

**<sup>4</sup>So the children of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only.**

1. Israel's repentance was genuine, as evidenced by their getting rid of their idols & whole-hearted devotion to God.
2. In the next verses, we see that God delivered them from the Philistines – beginning a campaign that eventually saw their complete defeat.

## III. CONCLUSION

### A. *What's the Spirit Saying?*

1. As we end this morning – what's the Spirit saying to you?
2. Is God bringing up stuff He wants you to get rid of?
3. Are there items at home, work, or in your car that need to be booted?

4. Let me be so bold as to urge you to take care of that *today*, right after service, or if it's at work, first thing tomorrow.

**B. Victory**

1. If your spiritual experience has been one of constant struggle & defeat, it may be because your affections are divided, just as Israel's was.
2. The Philistines dominated them for 20 years.
3. Victory & deliverance came when they removed their idols & gave themselves *completely* to God.
4. It may be that your demonic enemy has been able to maintain a foothold, a beach-head against you by your permission of some affection that competes with God.
5. I'm confident that if that's the case, the Spirit is speaking to you about that thing even now.