**SPIRITUAL REVIVAL AT MIZPAH**

July 27, 2014

1 Samuel 7:1-17

Key Verse 7:3 “And Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, ‘If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.’”

Today many people lament that Christianity is declining in a post-modern age. Many people, especially young people, are turning away from God. We receive rejection after rejection for our Bible study. Can spiritual revival happen in our generation? Last week we saw how the Israelites thought they could use the ark of God for their own benefit, but it backfired on them. They were defeated by the Philistines and the ark of God was captured. But God revealed his holiness among the Philistines by inflicting the devastating plagues among them. He also showed his holiness to the Israelites by putting to death 70 men who looked into the ark. They asked, “Who can stand in the presence of the Holy God?” When the relationship between the holy God and his people was broken, they were left in spiritual darkness for 20 years. In today’s passage we see how God used Samuel as a spiritual leader for his people Israel and brought them to repentance before God and restore their relationship. Let’s learn today how spiritual revival came through Samuel so that there may be spiritual revival in Canada today.

Look at verse 2. “It was a long time, twenty years in all, that the ark remained at Kiriath Jearim, and all the people of Israel mourned and sought after the Lord.” The ark of God was back in Israel, but it was in Kiriath Jearim, a remote place for twenty years. It seemed to be God’s training for his people who had taken him for granted and misused the ark. They realized how hopeless they were without a right relationship with God. There is a saying, “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.” When the ark was not easily accessible, they realized how miserable their lives were apart from God. Verse 2 says “all the people of Israel mourned and sought after the Lord.” When they realized their ungratefulness toward God and taking God for granted, they broke down with tears flowing down their cheeks and sought the Lord again. In our desperation of life, God leads our thirsty souls back to him. Deuteronomy 4:29 says, “But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.”

Look at verse 3. “And Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, ‘If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.” The people showed a good change of attitude from before. Probably it had a lot to do with Samuel’s Bible teaching and preaching for 20 years. Samuel recognized the spirit of God working in people’s hearts to repent by returning to the Lord. Therefore, Samuel gave them spiritual direction including a challenge and a promise. Perhaps Samuel was 32 years old. (At the time of the war at Aphek, he was 12 years old.)

Here the foreign gods indicated the gods of Baal. The people believed that the gods of Baal gave rain and harvest. This god can be compared to a materialism god, Mammon in our time. Ashtoreth is a goddess of beauty and sex (Lev 44:19). So, there were lustful acts that took place after offering sacrifices to her. This can be compared to post-modern young people who seek sexual hedonism. Many people worship the modern-day Baals and Ashtoreths. Materialism and hedonism dominate their way of living. Just turn on the TV, open your web browser or newspaper to notice how we are bombarded by advertisements for things that catch our eyes. New car models are usually introduced with the pictures of bikini-clad models. Beer commercials also include half-naked women. They give false impression that if you have the car or drink the beer, you can have beautiful women as in the commercials. In this situation, it is easy for our hearts to be divided between God and this world. But our hearts should not be divided (Lk 16:13). We should not worship the counterfeit gods. If Samuel was with us today, he would say to us, “If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then get rid of these idols, commit yourselves fully to the Lord and serve him only!”

What was the response of the people when Samuel urged them to repent? Look at verse 4. “So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the Lord only.” The people accepted Samuel’s message of repentance and began to repent. They destroyed the poles of Baals and Ashtoreths. They did not just say, “I repent.” They had clear and decisive action to prove their repentance and put them away, maybe burying them or destroying them completely. Some students repented of listening to dark rock groups and destroyed their record collection, worth hundreds of dollars. Some students who had dirty magazines hidden in their desk drawer threw them in the trash can.

When Samuel saw the repentance in the people of Israel, he realized that it was time to restore the spiritual relationship between God and his chosen people. It was time of corporate repentance. Look at verse 5. “Then Samuel said, ‘Assemble all Israel at Mizpah and I will intercede with the Lord for you.’” It was important for the people of Israel to gather together to pray as a group and repent together. This was like the people of Nineveh—beginning from the king to ordinary people, who repented when Jonah delivered the message of God’s judgment. Look at verse 6. “When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, ‘We have sinned against the Lord.’” “Pouring out water” means “pouring his or her sins out of one’s heart.” This is a symbol of sincere repentance (Ps 22:14). Fasting means godly lament and meekly attitude before God. “We have sinned against the Lord (6c).” At Mizpah God worked a great revival when people repented.

But their revival meeting was rudely interrupted by the Philistines. After the Aphek war, the Philistines stationed an outpost and its garrison (10:5) there, and they watched over the Israelites and their spiritual activities (16). For a long time, Israel was under the power of the Philistines. When they heard that all the people of Israel assembled at Mizpah under Samuel’s spiritual leadership, they thought the people of Israel were united for a holy war against them. So they wanted to attack them first. They thought they could easily defeat the Israelites as they had done before. When the Israelites heard of it, they became afraid. The death of the 34,000 of their sons was still fresh in their memory. In this desperate situation, what did the Israelites do? This time, they did not become superstitious. They turned to God. Look at verse 8. They said to Samuel, “Do not stop crying out to the Lord our God for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines.” They asked Samuel to continue to pray for them to God so that God might rescue them. This time, they depended on God. They had changed.

Look at verse 9. “Then Samuel took a sucking lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. He cried out to the Lord on Israel’s behalf, and the Lord answered him.” A sucking lamb is a lamb without defect. “A whole burnt offering” means to give one’s whole heart. A burnt offering is a sacrifice made to the Lord (Lev 1:3-9). It symbolizes sincere repentance on the part of the individual (6), and a complete decision made to God. When Samuel was offering the burnt offering to God with his people, the Philistines armed themselves with iron weapons and attacked at the hill of Mizpah. They were ready to destroy the altar. The assembly place would be turned into the shambles soon. But Samuel did not even blink his eyes. He only offered the burnt offering with his people and prayed to God. How did God rescue his people who prayed to him?

Verses 10-11 say, “While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle. But that day the Lord thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites. The man of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth Car.” God sent loud thunder against the Philistines which was like a nuclear bomb. When they heard it, they were frightened and began to run away. Then the people of Israel restored their morale and began to sweep out all the Philistines. The Almighty God rescued his people with his almighty power. When they did not have a right relationship with God and depended on the Ark in a superstitious way, they were defeated by the Philistines. But when they repented their unbelief and cried to God, God gave them a great victory.

Look at verse 12. “Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, ‘Thus far has the Lord helped us.’” A stone monument which was called “Ebenezer” made him remember that God helped him. This stone monument was to help them express their hearts of thanksgiving toward God who helped them in the time of their crisis. In order to express the heart of thanksgiving, we should build a monument of thanksgiving. Noah built the altar of thanksgiving after the flood. He built a monument of thanksgiving and thanked God for saving him and his family members during the flood (Ge 9:20). Joshua took 12 stones and built an altar after crossing the Jordan River. It was a monument of thanksgiving to God after crossing the Jordan River safely as on dry land. Likewise, Samuel built Ebenezer, a monument of thanksgiving.

Samuel wanted Israel to always remember God who was faithful to help them in their time of desperation. He did not want them to forget the grace of God. Forgetting comes naturally, but remembering takes effort. In the future, when they face trouble, Israel could look at the stone and remember God who helped them and give thanks to God and trust him for the present and the future. How important it is to remember God who has been with us in our lives. The best way is to write down our life testimonies and read them to remember God’s grace.

Can spiritual revival happen in this generation? Yes, it can. It happened in USA before. 20 years after the American Revolution around 1790, USA was far worse than today. It was a time of moral bankruptcy. Drunkenness (like drug use today) became epidemic. Out of a population of five million, 300,000 were confirmed drunkards of which 15,000 died each year. For the first time in the history of the American settlement, women were afraid to go out at night for fear of assault. Bank robberies were daily occurrences. The Methodists were losing more members than they were gaining. A typical Congregation church in Massachusetts had not taken one young person into fellowship in 16 years. The Chief Justice of the United States, John Marshall, wrote to the Bishop of Virginia, James Madison, that the Church “was too far gone ever to be redeemed.” Voltaire alleged, and Tom Paine echoed, “Christianity will be forgotten in 30 years.” A poll taken at Harvard had discovered not one believer in the whole of the student body. They took a poll at Princeton, a much more evangelical place: they discovered only two believers in the student body. Princeton students took a Bible out of a local Presbyterian church in New Jersey, and burned it in a public bonfire. Christians were so few on campus in the 1790’s that they met in secret, like a communist cell, and kept their minutes in code so that no one would know.

How did the situation change? It came through a concert of prayer. Finally in September 1857, a praying Christian businessman named Jeremiah Lanphier started a prayer meeting at 12 noon every Wednesday in the upper room of the Dutch Reformed Church in Manhattan. In response to his advertisement, only six people out of the population of a million showed up. But, the following week, there were fourteen, and then twenty-three, when it was decided to meet everyday for prayer. By late winter, they were filling the Dutch Reformed Church, then the Methodist Church, then Trinity Episcopal Church. In March of 1858, every church and public hall in downtown New York was filled. People began to be converted, 10,000 a week in New York City alone. The movement spread throughout New England, the church bells bringing people to prayer at 8 in the morning, 12 noon, 6 in the evening. The Baptist had so many people to baptize that they went down to the river, cut a big hole in the ice, and baptized them in the cold water. The revival spread to all over USA. It reached Chicago. Trinity Episcopal Church in Chicago had 121 members in 1857; in 1860, 1400. That was typical of the churches. More than a million people were converted to God in one year out of a population of 30 million. (It would be like 10 million people today.) It sent missionaries to many countries. Effects were felt for forty years. Having begun in a movement of prayer, it was sustained for a generation by a movement of prayer. This is called the 2nd great awakening in the USA.

It has been too long since we last saw the fires of genuine, nationwide revival sweep our land. But we sense among young people a yearning for authenticity and wholehearted service for the Holy God. It is time for revival to begin in Toronto. May God raise up a spiritual leader like Samuel who can lead his people to repentance and spiritual revival.