

THURSDAY, MARCH 1

SAMUEL AND THE EBENEZER (1 SAMUEL 7)

“If you return to the LORD with all your heart, remove the foreign gods... direct your hearts to the LORD and serve him alone; and he will deliver you...” (1 Samuel 7:3)

Sometimes holy ground has to be unearthed before it's recognized. When Israel's Ark of the Covenant was taken by the Philistines in battle (see 1 Samuel 4), Israel wrongly assumed their military defeats and personal problems were a result of the lack of the Ark's presence among them. But the presence of the Ark did not always equal the presence of a holy God.

Wrong living and disobedience distanced Israel from the God they said they worshiped, much like it does with us. Therefore, no symbol could replace God's presence among them... or us. Israel believed if the Ark returned to their camp, the easy fix for all their problems would arrive with it. Similarly, sometimes we think just a little “church” or a little “Bible” will do the same for us.

Instead, Samuel who served as prophet and judge of Israel, called the people's attention to a greater issue: their unrighteousness before the Lord. Right living was buried beneath worship of false gods and allegiances to other things. Samuel's challenge to the people to “return to the Lord with all your heart” wasn't a cure to get the Ark back, but a call to invite God back into their midst.

When Samuel dug up the sin Israel tried to hide, God's people responded to what was uncovered. A drink offering, a national fast and corporate confession of sin was the result. Israel recognized their need not for the Ark, but for the Presence it represented. They invited God to come among them once again and make them holy.

Like Israel, at times our need to experience holy ground isn't about a place, but a person. Sometimes God wants to break ground in us, to expose the hidden things that separate us from God and invite us to respond in repentance and honest confession of our need for mercy and help.

As the nation repented, Israel was ravaged again by the Philistines, but this time “the Lord thundered with a great thunder on that day” and the enemy army was defeated. To remember God's presence with them, Samuel anointed a stone which he named Ebenezer, saying: “Thus far the Lord has helped us” (12). This is holy ground!

The Lord, the Holy One, was Israel's help. Not the Ark. Not even Samuel, the judge. In God's presence, there could be no unholy thing - no idol, no artifact, no attitude. When Israel finally set aside everything else and chose to serve God alone, they unearthed the most precious treasure of all - the authentic presence of the living God. What might God be unearthing in you? What ground must God break so that you experience God's holy presence?