

Taking up the cross (1 Sam. 6)

Part 1

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[00:00:01] It might seem a very unusual scripture to read to you at the beginning, the incident of the returning of the Ark of God by the Philistines, after the Lord had dealt with them so severely, whilst it was with them, the Philistines, the seven months. I hope that you will perceive why I have read it before we are finished. Just to recount to you very briefly, relying upon your knowledge of the story, it is worthy to bear in mind that this was a very, very dark day in the history of the children of Israel.

Listen to this, the word of the Lord was precious in those days, there was no open vision. It came to pass that at the time when Eli was laid down in his place, his eyes began [00:01:02] to wax dim, he could not see, and ere the lamp of God went out in the temple of the Lord. No open vision, I take it that means no direct communication from God for his people.

An aged high priest, over 90 years old, feeble, heavy, fat, blind, with two sons who were evil men, and the lamp of God nearly going out.

Soon after this, the children of Israel, without any communication from God, purely [00:02:03] of their own vaunted self-esteem, went out and set a battle in Array against the Philistines, and they were put to flight.

At that moment, in their superstition, having no regard to the true worth of the Ark of God, they devised a plan of fetching, notice the word, fetching, the Ark of God, and carrying it down into the camp in the battle.

And this too was soon accompanied with disaster.

The Ark of God was taken captive, the children of Israel were put to flight, the two sons of Eli, into whose care was committed that precious Ark, were killed, and the messenger [00:03:10] returns with the news, and finds the old Eli sitting on a stile awaiting, and the wife of Phinehas about to bring forth child, and the message is, the Ark is taken, and the old man falls backward and breaks his neck, and the child is born, and the mother dies, and she gives it a name, where is the glory?

Ichabod.

David, in Psalm 78, tells us the reason for these incidences, we've read the historical [00:04:04] account of their taking place, but I just, you might turn to it, Psalm 78, where we are let into the secret

of why these dreadful things had happened.

Psalm 78 and verse 56, David says, Yet they tempted and provoked the Most High God and kept not his testimonies, but turned back and dealt unfaithfully like their fathers, and they were turned aside like a deceitful bow. They provoked him to anger with their high places, they moved him to jealousy with their graven images.

When God heard this, he was wroth and greatly abhorred Israel, so that he forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent which he had placed among men, and delivered his strength into captivity [00:05:05] and his glory into the enemy's hand.

We might speak about the failure of Eli in regard to his sons. We may speak about those two sons, their manner of life, their evil ways. But these things were but the result of what was the true condition of Israel at that moment that we have just read of. They kept not his testimonies, they forsook his ways, they made graven images to such an extent that God abhorred them.

And Eli and that line of priesthood which came from Ethamah comes to an end.

[00:06:02] And for a moment in the history of Israel, they have no ark, they have no priest, they have no prophet.

It's all dark, dismal, dreary, and they have no glory.

It's very difficult to find a blacker, darker picture in the history of the children of Israel than that with which the book of Samuel commences. Two books previously, the book finishes with the statement that every man did that which was right in his own eyes. There was no king in Israel at that moment. Then we have the little book of Ruth, wonderful little book of Ruth, which ends with God's remedy, David.

[00:07:05] The last word of the book of Ruth, David.

This is the way that God was going to move through the course of much exercise and many wonderful ways to bring about he who would yet restore Israel. Not only to its former glory, but extend the kingdom to its fullest extent, a picture of he who is yet to come.

I've just painted the picture for you, put a background for you. Now then, the ark was in the midst of the Philistines and they had been plagued because of it.

They said, how shall we send it back, and they devised a scheme. [00:08:04] The ark comes back, you see, not because of anything that Israel does, not because of any high priest or prophet or king or any faithfulness of the people. No, God moves independently from himself in a mysterious way.

And he moves in a way that communicates to you and I today a principle.

No doubt that which the Philistines suggested was overruled, an ordered of God, too kind with calves, never having borne the yoke, untrained, undomesticated, were yoked to a cart and their calves were locked up at home.

[00:09:08] The Philistines said, let's see which way they go and if they go straight down the road to Beth Shemesh, we shall know that it was the hand of the Lord.

We read of it, did we not?

And the kind took the straight way to the way of Beth Shemesh and went along the highway, lowing as they went, turn not aside to the right hand, to the left. They were acting in a way that was absolutely contrary to nature.

They've never had a yoke on before, but they accepted the yoke that was placed on them, without any murmuring, at least it's not recorded. [00:10:06] Their own kind calves were locked up at home, probably needing sustenance, probably the kind themselves, heavy with milk, and yet they forsook their calves and they went straight down the road to Beth Shemesh, contrary to every natural God-given in creation instinct that was in them.

They had come under a superior power.

They had been taken hold of by another control that was outside of themselves. And that power, and that call, cut across every natural instinct and relationship that they had.

[00:11:16] That's a very profound lesson. I don't think anybody in Israel understood what was happening, the least the men of Beth Shemesh, because in all probability about 70 of them were slain.

They were bringing in the wheat harvest, and there appeared down the road the cart, and the kind, and the ark.

They rejoiced when they saw it, and it turned aside into the field by the stone. Those two kind had done a remarkable thing, but you know there was no garlands placed [00:12:06] around their necks, there was no veneration of those two kind.

They were slaughtered, and they were sacrificed.

I want you to think about those things. I want you to bear those two kind in mind, what they did, because there was in that camp of Israel a little lad.

At that moment, almost unknown, but there was one who was going to recover the hearts of the people to God, and bring in the king, the man after God's own heart. [00:13:05] But before that day could dawn, the children of Israel in measure, or some of them, had to learn the lessons of the two kind.

Dear friends and brethren, it may be that in some way we've arrived at a similar position as the children of Israel.

I'm not going into that. Those are exercises that those who bear things before the Lord, I believe, will understand, and perhaps sympathize with, pray about, be in exercise about, lack of priestly service to God, lack of priestly service to men, little power in the word, little strength [00:14:12] in the testimony, the light nearly gone, the ark.

May we suggest, beloved brethren, is the Lord with us?

Have we lost the ark?

Is the person of Christ, and all that he is to God, his preciousness to God, have we lost the ark?

I do pray that you will answer that question before the Lord this afternoon with me, in [00:15:01] such a way that our own hearts might be affected by the lesson of the two kind.

Turn to Luke 14.

I've never ever heard any brother minister on these words.

I think I know why.

Because I cannot minister on them either. Because when you come to Luke chapter 14 and you read words that are probably the most testing words that the Lord Jesus ever said, listen, for any man come to me, hate not his father, and his mother, and wife, children, brethren, sisters.

[00:16:05] I ask you, dear brethren, sympathetically, what does the Lord mean?

Is this one of those verses that the translators would fiddle around with and say, oh, you have to spiritualize these things? They don't mean literally what the words say. That's a very dangerous attitude to adopt towards God's word. No man, whoever he might be, has a right to say that God's word doesn't mean what it clearly, plainly states.

That doesn't mean to say that we need to be very careful about what we say about these words.

I did once hear a brother, not in ministry, give a comment on this verse, and he said to me, Geoffrey, the only way that you'll ever understand the meaning of that verse [00:17:01] is to go in at the back door.

You'll notice that I stopped reading at a point in that verse, and I did it deliberately. Notice the back door of that verse says, yea, and his own life also.

You see, you have to put that verse into the context of that expression, his own life also. You'll never understand that verse, of what it means, of what it implies, of the force that it carries with. The Lord Jesus says, you cannot be my disciple, unless you do this. We've forgotten that, brethren. Are we, in our ideas today, thinking that we can do this, that, that and the other thing [00:18:02] successfully for the Lord, following him? And have we forgotten the basic principle of discipleship, which is found in these verses? Take up the cross, daily.

That will involve hating your own life, and if that is the case, the rest, to my mind of thinking, becomes somewhat clearer. There have been men, of course, which have proved, I can recollect, I can't remember their names, but two men in the dark ages, that were burnt at the stake, will head past their own wives, and their own children, a stake, your wife, your children, a Christ [00:19:12] in heaven, and a martyr's death, a way out, we can't.

That's when a verse like this comes home, in power, and how much do we know about those circumstances? They went on, and they were burnt, Latimer, I think, was one of them.

But these were the words of the Lord Jesus, and we live in a day where we don't know anything about this.

Does that therefore mean that taking up the cross, and hating your own life, and being prepared to put the Lord before everything, and every other person, and your own life, [00:20:02] does that mean that that no longer applies to us today? No it does not.

The Lord Jesus paints a picture then, he talks about a man who starts to build a tower, something that is prominent, something that will be seen, something that should be a place of security, but he started to do so without sitting down and counting the cost.

Have we counted the cost, beloved brethren, of being a disciple of the Lord Jesus today?

Or do we adopt the attitude, I'll pay the price as it comes, if I can afford it? That won't do.

The cost has to be counted before you start, or you'll never finish.

[00:21:07] To start and not finish is a mockery to the world. Is it true?

Have we started, beloved brethren, something that we cannot finish?

Or what king going to war, with only half what the enemy has got? And that is always true in Christianity. The enemy has always apparently got far more than we have. Does anybody think he is matched for the devil? Well don't bother even to go to war, you've lost the battle before you start. And the Lord Jesus suggests, no he doesn't suggest, he refers to what men would do in [00:22:04] circumstances like that, seek a compromise, let's sit down and talk about this thing, you are bigger than I, I don't want to lose my life, but I might be prepared to give that up and give that up if you let me carry on.

That won't do either, it's not God's way.

The Psalms speak about one of God's people being able to put to flight 10,000. One against 10,000.

If God is with the one, it doesn't matter whether there are 10,000 demons with every one of the rest, God will win.

[00:23:05] That's where faith and counting the cost comes in. Salt is good, but if the salt have lost its savour, brethren, I ask myself, I ask every one of us, has the salt lost its savour?

You say what do you mean by that? We might go backwards over what we've just considered. Not counting the cost, the possibility of compromise, the matter of putting other things before the Lord, the not being prepared to take up the cross and what it means. That is what produces salt with no savour.

[00:24:04] And the scripture says it's not good for anything, throw it away. He that hath ears to hear, let

him hear.

I do trust, beloved brethren, friends and fellow Christians, that we have ears to hear today what the Lord is saying to each one of us in regard to the present state of things. I've read of three men, three men who I believe have been placed in the scriptures as examples to us.

That very thing, you may know, is said of Saul of Tarsus, Paul, that in him there was a complete delineation of these things, for you and I who have believed his testimony. [00:25:03] What did that man, I'll just read the verses again, in Acts chapter 20.

It may be that his public ministry was drawing to an end and that he was to enter now into a path, a period in his life, rather than preaching the word, he was going to defend the word.

And yet in defending it, he bore it before governors and kings and Gentiles.

What must the Lord's servant be if he is to defend the truth of God before the enemy? We've been reading Acts recently in Ipswich, and you know just on Thursday evening we thought [00:26:01] about that august company where, you know, Agrippa and Berenice, his wife, with Festus came in with all their pomp and all their glory into that assemblage. And there stood one man alone in the middle of it, and he bore witness to the resurrection of Christ. Think it not strange, Agrippa, with you, an incredible thing that God should raise the dead, he said.

He was alone, humanly speaking, arrayed with all the world and its pomp and its glory, and they couldn't say a word to him. They said in effect, what shall we do with this man? We can't get rid of him. He won't go away. The Jews won't leave him alone. Send him to Caesar.

[00:27:08] But Paul knew the meaning of taking up his cross daily and following the Lord, and so he is able to say in verse 24 of Acts 20, none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto me.

He says there's something more important than everything in this life. I've been given a job to do by the Lord. I might finish my course with joy and the ministry I have received of the Lord to testify the gospel of the grace of God.

He was a man who had learned the lesson of the two kind.

[00:28:10] He was a man who knew in his life the power of a risen Christ. He knew in his affections the magnetic compelling power of a Christ in glory and of a life that had been apprehended of Jesus Christ, and because of that he put paramount in his life. He strove above everything else to the end that he might know why, to what end he had been taken hold of on that Damascus road by Jesus Christ. No beloved brethren, the burden of my little exercise this afternoon is that you and I might get a hold of and work out in our lives why the Lord has taken hold of us, why he's [00:29:06] left us here, why he will soon take us to glory.

And the only way that you and I will ever arrive at that is to learn the meaning of the cross. As he say at the end of Galatians this man, let no man trouble me, I bear in my body the stigma, the brands of Jesus Christ.

The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ he says, by the which the world is crucified unto me, and I, unto the world.

I can remember hearing our dear brother, whoever the Lord will, will speak this evening, talk [00:30:05] about the cross, it crosses out the world, it's one thing that it does, but it crosses out you and I as well, and we have to learn what is involved in that.

It may involve the Lord Jesus, in moments in our life, taking first place over the things that are most dear and precious to us in this world. But here is a man who did that, he said I count not my life dear unto me. We've often commented upon the fact that there are four men in Philippians chapter 2, rightly so we concentrate our minds on the first man. [00:31:03] And in that little exhortation, and it is an exhortation, you have brought before us at the end of the exhortation what the cross was to him. He became obedient.

You may say to me dear friend, explain to me what my cross is, I cannot take up his cross.

That's why the Lord Jesus died for me, because I couldn't take up that cross, and the Lord knew it, and so he said I'll bear that cross for you.

And that cross for him, because of me, involved the judgement of God, and his death. [00:32:08] I cannot take up that cross, and nowhere does the scripture say we should, but every one of us has to take up his own cross, and apply that principle of obedience to the will of God, perhaps to its ultimate end.

And that's the way that Paul went. I believe Paul, in the experience of his soul, wanted to go the way that the Lord did. He said, if at any means, he says, cost what it might, I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.

And he applied that principle to his life, and even where we began to read, he says, yea, and if I be offered, that's a drink offering there by the way, an oblation, upon the sacrifice [00:33:04] and service of your faith, he spoke of the service of the Philippians and their faith as a sacrificial offering to God, and he says, if my death is like an oblation poured out upon that, he says, I shall joy and rejoice with you all in it all. You see, the man had come to the end of himself, and he was prepared to give all for the Lord Jesus.

And he speaks about Timothy, a much younger man, not an apostle.

He says, I want to send him to you. He says, for I have no man like-minded who will with genuine feeling care for your state. And then he says, for all seek their own, not the things of Jesus Christ. I've gone down this chapter, and the next chapter, and I've got half a dozen couplets. [00:34:05] Mine, his, mine, his, mine, his.

You do it.

Go down this chapter, and the next one, and see the way persons speak about mine, and his, and see how you fit in.

Paul says of the mass, all seek their own, not the things of Jesus Christ.

Is that true, brother? Is it true of me? Is it true of you?

But here was a young man, Timothy. He says, I've got nobody else quite like him. He has a genuine faith, speaks of that in second letter to Timothy. A genuine faith that reached out to God, that was balanced by a genuine care and feeling [00:35:03] for the saints of God.

Here was a young man who in his way, likewise, was learning what was involved in taking out up the cross.

And then what about Epaphroditus? Read much about him?

He'd taken a long journey from Philippi to Rome.

He carried with him the gift of the Macedonian brethren to Paul in prison. That was the lack that he speaks of. A little bit difficult to understand when he talks about this man supplying your lack, but the lack I think simply was, the gift had to be got from Philippi to Rome. [00:36:05] There was the gift in Philippi, there was Paul in Rome. There was a lack there. Epaphroditus says, I'll do it. I'll take it.

And it nearly killed him. Nearly killed him.

We're not told what happened to him, but the time he got to Rome and found Paul, he was nigh unto death.

Wasn't much, you know. You and I today get out the checkbook, write it out, put it in an envelope, stick it in a letterbox, and Her Majesty's service, do all the rest. Easy. Some of us don't even do that.

[00:37:03] This man took up the gift and carried it to a Roman prison, and it nearly killed him.

But what does Paul say about it? I send him therefore the more carefully, that when you see him again. You see, he was not only not concerned about his own life, he was concerned that the Philippians had heard that he was ill, and he was concerned about them because they were concerned about him. That's a very happy thing, you know, beloved brethren, isn't it, really? It's a very Christ-like spirit. It shows a care, a love, an affection, an esteem.

And Paul, writing to these Philippians, holds him up. He says, hold such a reputation. Here is a man who experimentally has known what it is to forsake everything else, to [00:38:08] take up a gift and take it to Paul in Rome.

It nearly killed him.

What does Paul say? Because for the work of Christ.

You notice that? Paul doesn't say, because of the gift that you've sent me, getting it to me. No, he doesn't say that. He says, because of the work of Christ, he was nigh unto death, not regarding his life.

Just commend these things to you, beloved brethren. One simple desire is to provoke interest, to rekindle affection for Christ, commitment [00:39:08] to the Lord, and a preparedness to take up the

Lord's things, and hold fast to them, and be prepared to count all else, whate'er it be, unworthy of our care.

At the judgment seat of Christ, there is available to every one of us, from him, well done, good, faithful servant, may it be so for the Lord's name, amen.