

“The Time is Fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at Hand,
Repent and Believe the Gospel.”

Pastor Sam Richards

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Texts: 1 Samuel 15:1-3; 13-23

I purposed to preach a sermon about the Apostolic Preaching—the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ as first declared by the apostles 1. as it first embodied the faith which Paul described 2. **As handed down to us orally** as reflected in its earliest written form (in the gospels, epistles) 3. **from those who were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word from the beginning. And I wanted to preach said sermon because I was studying the apostolic tradition, the apostolic succession—the forces, influences and doctrines which shaped the early church—before there were church buildings, ecclesiastical orders, or liturgies, vestments.** There was fellowship before all that, and worship, too. Simplicity prevailed. The reading of Scripture, in synagogue style, and home churches were the order of the day. The word of God was preached—there was testimony time, witnessing and faith in the name of Jesus was celebrated—it changed lives, delivered those oppressed, healed those who were sick and comforted those who were grieving. Love was promoted and needs were spiritually and practically met, by which I mean there was no separation between the love of God, and mission, and spiritual life. Prayer predominated, breaking of the bread and baptism of new believers as well as the continued edification of older believers transpired in house, so to speak, in family settings across the ancient near east and wider Mediterranean world setting (Africa and Europe included)—and on the east, the Jesus movement reached even into the precincts of the Indus River valley. The church was domesticated prior to her being organized and elaborated—it was *institutionalized* over the course of several centuries and I wanted to penetrate the life of the church in its most primitive stages—I wanted to get to the root of all that through a study of apostolic preaching.

But I soon discovered that this subject was too vast for a single sermon—hence a series for our Lenten Season. That said I want to describe our methodology. It is quite simple really, we will take what we have in Scripture: the preaching/teaching of John the Baptist and Jesus as our backdrop. Then we will proceed to actual apostolic sermons as recorded in the New Testament. When I printed out the passages recording the preaching of Peter, Stephen and Paul—as found in the Acts of the Apostles—and I will add theological bits and pieces from the letters of Paul, John, James, and Peter (these were doctrinal clarifications by apostolic preachers who dealt with the repercussions of their preaching and various crises in local bodies effecting the church at large). Just the act of printing these sermons out convinced me of the vastness of what I initially thought was a fairly narrow subject area. There is no dearth of material for us to sift through in search of the form, or shape of the apostolic preaching.

The first thing to be pointed out, I think, is the imperative mood of the gospel proclamation. The announcement of the kingdom was not declarative; nor was it descriptive so the indicative mood is not prominent. And the second thing is the presentness, the urgent and present sense of importance that accompanied the gospel declaration. Heaven was touching earth, or God’s sovereign power, rule and grace, were acutely visiting the earth in the person and presence of Jesus Christ. **Believe on**

Jesus and you shall be saved—a command, not a suggestion!—is urged on all hearers, all listeners because the consequences of obedience/or disobedience are eternal. Obey and live, disobey and be damned—that is eternally shamed and cast out. Seen in this light, the interrogative observation of John the Baptist makes much more sense; he said, **to the Pharisees** (coming to be baptized for repentance of their sins), **You brood of vipers, who warned you of the wrath to come?**

This is not the salutation of a seeker-friendly preacher and the words are bristling, not warm, welcoming and user friendly. There is a harshness bred of tough love because John was not so hostile, nor antagonistic in the main but flabbergasted. He was shocked that some of them were spiritually alive amongst the religious, walking dead. Not only is **Obedience better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.** (1 Samuel 15:22) but it also has spiritual priority.

This expression, **Obedience better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams** has a huge congruence to the gospel summons noted today. The original setting, Samuel, the prophet, rebuking King Saul for disobedience. In 1 Samuel 15 Samuel says: **The Lord sent me to anoint thee to be king over his people** (now that's a high calling with enormous demands) **over Israel; now therefore hearken unto the voice of the words of the Lord.** King Saul was anointed king not for his privilege and prerogative; he was anointed to be God's obedient servant. And when we hear, **Repent and Believe the Gospel**—we are hearing the **voice of the word of the Lord**—we note the congruency of which I speak. God is calling us into a like servanthood, we are to **hearken and obey—obedience is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.**

Thus saith the Lord of Hosts, Samuel is speaking God's words(!) **I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt.** Amalek lay in ambush to attack the hindmost, the weak and straggling ones to murder them. **Now go and smite Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have** (annihilate them for they are a hateful, wicked and evil people—a brood of vipers anyone?—and as vengeance is Mine) **and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and camel and ass.** (1 Samuel 15:1-3). There is a striking omission here and that is their sheep and rams! They go unnamed, but are certainly included.) Saul amassed an enormous army (200,000 footmen and 10,000 men of Judah: v. 4) Saul also alerted the Kenites to evacuate and escape destruction. **And Saul smote the Amalekites from Havelah to Shur** but they spared Agag, **the best of the sheep, and oxen and all the fatlings** as spoils of war, but God had put them under the ban of total annihilation. King Saul disobeyed God—he did not hearken and he was rejected (damned as it were): **Then came the word of the Lord unto Samuel saying, It repenteth me that I have made Saul to be king for he is turned back from following me, and hath not performed my commandments.** We do note that this is something that Jesus never did—not ever, not in the least.

Now note what follows: **And Samuel came to Saul; and Saul said unto him, Blessed be the Lord: I have performed the commandment of the Lord.** *But he hadn't!* **And Samuel sayeth then, what meant then this bleating of sheep in mine ears and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?h** And Saul said, **They have brought them back from the Amalekites: for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen, to sacrifice them unto the Lord thy God; and the rest we have utterly**

destroyed. That was not God's plan, that was a people-pleasing device of Saul's own making—something to make him look, shall I say, better than God. And King Saul repeatedly blames the people. Samuel says, **The Lord sent thee on a journey, and said, Go and utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they be consumed.** Saul defended himself and asserted that the people took the livestock intended to sacrifice them in Gilgal. To this Samuel answered: **Obedience is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.** Then he added, **For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because ye have rejected the word of the Lord, he hath rejected thee from being king.** (1 Samuel 15, vv. 13-23)

It is worth pausing here to note several things about divine judgment. King Saul was commanded to execute judgment on a sinful nation, the Amalekites and their judgment was just. Their elimination was their fate as sinners and that designation was horrifyingly inclusive—every person regardless of age, gender, rank or occupation all fell under condemnation. **I remember that which Amalek did to Israel . . . now go and smite them.** We would designate this as genocide, and count this “a crime against humanity.” The express command of God, **go and smite them . . . utterly destroy all that they have . . . destroy the sinners** signifies a purgation, a cleansing . . . an eradication of sinners *which we are told justified the timing and the performance of the conquest of the Promised Land.* As the exception often proves the rule, *we read on-line*, “To save their lives, **the Gibeonites** misrepresented to the Israelites that they came from a distant land and succeeded in concluding a (fraudulent) treaty with the Israelites. When these discovered that they had been deceived, they did not renege on their word. Now one difficult aspect of this judgment on the Amalekites is that those who perpetrated atrocities on Israel were the ancestors of those who were punished—when the measure of their wickedness had peaked however (apparently in King Saul's day), the hammer fell. There is in 1 Samuel 15 a clearer, and much less problematic judgment for sin; that which fell upon King Saul for not **hearkening** to the very explicit **word of the Lord**. No blame-shifting, or rationalizations count for him. The judgment is personal, direct and swift as well as instructive for us. That, and the fact that divine judgment can apply to whole nations ought to give willful sinners pause.

There is one further historical footnote to this episode. It would appear that King Agag wasn't the sole survivor of this purgation because we later read about Haman in the book of Esther who sought to avenge himself on all the Jewish people evidencing a deep tribal hostility. But that ambition ended with his being hanged on the high gallows that he had built to terrorize and terminate Mordecai.

This is a good point at which to take a break before we plunge into the shape of the apostolic preaching—**we are searching for the kernel, the most essential and central truth about our faith—as handed down!** IS THERE ANY LIVING CHRIST AT ALL?! The framing of apostolic preaching, however, has much to do with corporate guilt and the general sin condition of mankind. Remember John's phrase, **you brood of vipers**, alluding to the Pharisees in his day? If he was calling out the worst of the worse that would be one thing, but morally speaking he was calling out the morally superior and, given their desire for repentance, the most spiritually alive segment of Jewish society! But such is the hapless condition of sinners, trapped hopelessly in their sin and, justifiably under the wrath of God, that repentance is urgently called for! It is most necessary. Peter proclaims, a new day—a resurgence of prophecy and spiritual

revival!—*but he frames it in the context of real, present and corporate guilt. Jews first, and then the whole world.* **Men of Israel**, he says, you of all people who were best positioned to know who Jesus is—**attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through him in your midst(!)—just as you yourselves know—this Man, as planned by God, whom you nailed to the tree** (culpability, complicity and guilt!) **this Man, God raised from the dead, putting an end to the agony of death** (that is overthrowing the fear, terror and power of death!) is both the fulfillment of divine promises (of redemption) and of prophecy. **For David says of Him, ‘I saw the Lord always in my presence; for he is at my right hand, so that I will not be shaken.**

"God in David's eyes is no abstraction, but a Person, real, living, and walking at his side," and able to protect him from danger. Have we such a sense of companionship with God? I shall not be moved - neither in **character**, nor in **purpose**, nor in **work**." C. Short, The Pulpit Commentary

(Paraphrase Maclaren) "When we think of our inner weakness, when we remember the fluctuations of our feelings and emotions, when we compare the ups and downs of our daily life, or when we think of the larger changes covering years, which affect all our outlooks, our thoughts, our plans; and how

'We all are changed by still degrees,
All but the basis of the soul,
'it is much to say, 'I shall not be moved.'

And when we think of the obstacles that surround us, of the storms that dash against us, how we are swept by surges of emotion that wash away everything before their imperious onrush, or swayed by blasts of temptation that break down the strongest defenses, or smitten by the shocks of change and sorrow that crush the firmest hearts, it is much to say, in the face of a world pressing upon us with the force of the wind in a cyclone, that our poor, feeble reed shall stand upright and 'not be moved' in the fiercest blast. 'What went ye out for to see?' 'A reed shaken with the wind' -- that is humanity.

'Behold! I have made thee an iron pillar and brazen walls, and they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail' -- that is weak man, stiffened into uprightness, and rooted in steadfastness by the touch of the hand of a present God.

And, brother, there is nothing else that will stay a man's soul. The holdfast cannot be a part of the chain. It must be fastened to a fixed point. The anchor that is to keep the ship of your life from dragging and finding itself, when the morning breaks, a ghastly wreck upon the reef, must be outside of yourself, and the cable of it must be wrapped round the throne of God. The anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast, which will neither break nor drag, can only be firm when it 'enters into that within the veil.' God, and God only, can thus make us strong!

So, dear friends, let us see to it that we fasten our aims and purposes, our faith and love, our submission and obedience, upon that mighty Helper who will be with us and make us strong, that we may 'stand fast in the Lord and in the power of His might.'"

Amen