

WHEN RITUAL REPLACES REALITY

“In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.” —1 SAMUEL 3:1

Since Israel’s conquest of Canaan, God had raised up judges to govern the nation. During this period, the people grew tired of appointed judges, and wanted a monarchy like other nations. Samuel was God’s prophet at the time and this displeased him, but he brought the people’s grievances before God. “It’s not you they have rejected,” God said. “They have rejected me as their King” (1 Samuel 8:7).

This national rebellion had its roots in a spiritual declension. The first book of Samuel opens when the spiritual life was centered in Shiloh, a small town about thirty miles north of Jerusalem. The priesthood was led by a man called Eli, along with his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who are described in Scripture as wicked men, having no regard for the Lord. They exploited their position as priests for self gain, and Eli, old and weak, failed to restrain them. What happened to the priesthood in Shiloh?

No one sets out to be a spiritual phony. No one comes to Christ wanting godliness without power, yet many Christians again and again degenerate into that condition. Their lives are reduced to an outward form, and any sense of spiritual reality is lost. They know little of what it means to walk with God, to hear His voice, to depend on His indwelling Spirit, and consequently, have no

expectancy of His working in their lives. They may know spiritual language but nothing of spiritual life and this is the state of the priesthood in Israel. They performed their duties religiously, but it had become a cold, barren routine in which the ritual replaced the reality.

When ritual replaces reality, one of two things happens; either the ritual becomes desecrated or we deify the ritual and make it the all important thing, leaving God out. The value of any ritual is not found in the ritual itself, but in what it points and speaks to. Baptism, communion, prayer, Bible study all point to Christ, but apart from intimate communion with Him merely become outward form.

God is committed to only one agenda and it is His own. To the extent we deviate from it is the extent to which we are on our own, and this was the diagnosis in Israel. Psalm 78:60 says of God, “He abandoned the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent he had set up among humans.” But to the extent we have a genuine desire to accomplish God’s purpose is the extent to which we come to experience His presence and power in our lives.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, I pray for a work of your Holy Spirit that fills me completely and keeps me in intimate union with You. Thank You, Lord.

TO REFLECT UPON: Does it feel like I am simply going through the motions or am I enjoying a genuine relationship with Christ?