

They Feared the Lord Yet
Served Their Own gods
2 Kings 17:33

The Old Testament is full of history and instruction that provide us with great wisdom for living today. Even though the Old Law is not the law that we follow today (Gal. 5:3-4), the Old Testament was written for us so that we may learn this wisdom. Therefore it is written in Rom. 15:1, *“For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.”*

The account of the Samaritans after the deportation of Israel from the land holds some very important lessons that we need for today. For this reason we will consider this account in order that we may learn the lesson God teaches therein.

The Samaritans

Throughout their history the people of Israel had developed a reputation for being stubborn and rebellious. Even though God delivered them from Egyptian bondage by great signs and wonders they still disobeyed Him. Even though He spoke to them from the mountain, gave them manna, and guided them through the wilderness they still rejected His ways. In 1 Samuel they rejected God as their king because they wanted a human king *“like all the nations”* (1 Sam. 8:5). After a king had been established the sins of the people resulted in a civil war which divided the kingdom around the year 931 B.C. After that time, those who inhabited the northern portion of the land were known as Israel while those who inhabited the southern portion were known as Judah. During the reign of Solomon God had designated Jerusalem for the only proper place of worship, but when the kingdom split Jerusalem was controlled by Judah, the southern kingdom. For this reason the northern kingdom established their own capital, as well as their own place of worship of which God did not approve (1 Kings 12:25-30). Eventually the capital of this northern kingdom was moved to a hill upon which king Asa built a city. He called its name Samaria (1 Kings 16:24).

Needless to say Israel did not turn from their evil ways, but continued to rebel against God and serve the foreign gods of the nations around them. For this reason God allowed the Assyrian Empire to invade the land and take the people captive as punishment. So it was that Samaria, as the capital, was invaded and the king and all the people were led away into captivity (2 Kings 17:5-7). It was not customary, however, for conquering empires to leave a newly conquered land desolate. Therefore the king of the Assyrians brought people from other conquered lands into Samaria to dwell there in Israel’s place. Thus it is written in 2 Kings 17:24, *“Then the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Ava, Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel; and they took possession of Samaria and dwelt in its cities.”*

At the beginning of their dwelling in Samaria these people experienced great trouble, for they were attacked by lions which killed some of them. This was because they did not serve God the way the people of that land were supposed to. *“So they spoke to the king of Assyria, saying, “The*

nations whom you have removed and placed in the cities of Samaria do not know the rituals of the God of the land; therefore He has sent lions among them, and indeed, they are killing them because they do not know the rituals of the God of the land” (2 Kings 17:26). So, they asked for one of the priests of Israel to be sent back to Samaria in order to teach them the rituals of God (vs. 28). From this priest they learned how to serve God, they learned His ordinances according to the Law of Moses, and they learned how to fear Him. Though these people were not originally God’s people to whom He promised the land, they received the law of the Lord and were living in the land of God’s people. Therefore, in spite of their origins, they were expected to live according to all of God’s law, as it is written in Deut. 27:26, *“Cursed is the one who does not confirm all the words of this law.”* In 2 Kings 17:34 it describes the Law as *“THEIR statutes or THEIR ordinances”* (emph. Mine, DP). Therefore the law of God which had been taught to them was bound upon them as if they were God’s people. Yet, in spite of these things, the Samaritans did not repent of their former ways, as it says, *“To this day they continue practicing the former rituals”* (vs. 34).

2 Kings 17:33 perfectly describes the character of these people as it says, *“They feared the LORD, yet served their own gods—according to the rituals of the nations from among whom they were carried away.”* It is upon this passage that we must place the emphasis of our lesson. *“They feared the Lord, yet served their own gods.”* This is the beginning of the Samaritan people.

Applications to Consider

What is it that we can learn from the example of the Samaritans? Much in every way. For many people today follow in the footsteps of the Samaritans; they “fear the Lord,” yet “continue practicing their former rituals.” As we apply the wisdom of the Old Testament scriptures, let us consider the following points:

1. In the history of the church there have been many people who were obedient to the faith, but were eventually led astray by the false doctrines and worldly customs, just like Israel in 2 Kings 17:7-8. The apostle Paul warned Timothy of these in 2 Timothy 4:3-4. In this manner men, claiming to be God’s people, have been led away to serve the traditions of men in false religion. Every church which practices things not authorized in the scriptures has fallen into this pattern of disobedience. Whenever we teach as doctrine the traditions of men (Matthew 15:8-9) we follow the same example as Israel before they were taken out of Samaria. Therefore Jesus warns that every congregation which falls into this snare. *“Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place -- unless you repent”* (Rev. 2:5).

2. Because the Samaritans saw that God did not approve of them they sought to learn His rituals in order to serve Him (2 Kings 17:27). Yet they did not forsake their old ways according to the commandment which they received (Read 2 Kings 17:35-40). We must take note of this attitude, for it is one of the most prevalent attitudes in the religious world today. **The Samaritans wanted protection, just as many people today want salvation, but they were only willing to do the bare minimum of what was required of them.** This same pattern has recurred many times throughout history. Many years after the apostasy which began in the second century A.D., several men began to realize that they were not keeping the law of God (much like the Samaritans). Therefore they sought to correct the practices of the “Christianity” of their day. They sought the law of the Lord more diligently and tried to teach others as well. This period is what most historians refer to as the reformation period, which lasted from around 1500 A.D. to

about 1800 A.D. It was during this time that men began to learn more accurately the commands given to the New Testament church, but like the Samaritans they were not willing to give up their old practices. They feared the Lord, yet continued practicing their former rituals. Rather than doing away with denominationalism, they established their own denominations. Rather than doing away with human creeds they established new creeds. Rather than doing away with ritualistic, man-made worship, they established their own forms of worship. Therefore the children of the Samaritans are living in the denominations today.

3. The Samaritans were a people who lived in the land which belonged to God's people and kept some of the ordinances of God. They also expected the peace that God's people were supposed to have enjoyed. In Ezra 4:2 we learn that many years after the Samaritans settled in the land they had come to believe that they were truly seeking the Lord, in spite of their idolatry. Therefore they enquired of Judah saying, *"Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you do; and we have sacrificed to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here."* Notice the sincerity of these people. They truly did believe that they were serving God. But they were not accepted as God's people. They were not allowed to help build the temple according Ezra 4:3. Neither did Jesus allow His disciples to go into the cities of the Samaritans in order to preach the gospel before His death on the cross (Matt. 10:5). Their sincerity did not save them. Neither will it save the many people today who continue to walk according to the traditions of men and do not forsake their false doctrines so that they may obey the Lord in all things.

4. Aside from those who believe they are accepted by God with their human traditions, there are many who obey the true gospel, but do not repent of their sins. These are in the same situation as the Samaritans. God expects that those who "fear Him" ought to forsake all that is in the world, to come out from among them, and to obey Him in all things (2 Cor. 6:17). But there are many who believe they are right while continuing to lie, drink, smoke, carouse, use foul language and practice all manner of things not befitting God's people. The account of the Samaritans shows us how terrible this character truly is.

Solution

Romans 15:4 shows us that the Old Testament was written for us. 1 Corinthians 10:6, 11 it says that some of those examples are meant to teach us of the character that we must avoid. Through the example of the Samaritans God teaches us that it is not good enough to serve Him superficially. If we want to please Him then we must acknowledge Him in all that we do. If we want to be accepted as God's people we must love Him with all of our heart. Concerning this Jesus has said, *"If you love Me, Keep My commandments"* (John 14:15). Those who are obedient to God are greatly blessed, but they must see the need to leave their former practices and turn to God first. Do you see this need?