

Poverty and The Ministry

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“If the Lord will keep him humble, we will keep him poor,” expresses a common approach to ministerial salaries. This runs contrary to Paul’s injunction that effective preachers and teachers “be counted worthy of double honour” (I Timothy 5:17). Churches and schools are ministries not businesses. Stingy compensation for conscientious preachers and teachers is inexcusable. So costly! How unlike our generous Heavenly Father! “They that seek the LORD shall not want any good thing” (Psalm 34:10). Heartless “cost cutting” undercuts pastoral ministries especially to preachers’ fiscally stressed families locked in a callused “stained glass jungle.”

Israelites, likewise, neglected the Tithe, in effect robbing God (Malachi 3:8-10). This weakened Levites’ life-affirming ministries in the Temple and local villages. After Joshua died, Israel abandoned the Tithe, despite the command to “forsake not the Levite” (Deuteronomy 12:19). So, Israel “did evil in the sight of the LORD” in baby-killing Baal worship (Judges 3:7) and then was oppressed by heathen kings. “When the children of Israel cried unto the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer [judge]” (Judges 3:9) to ban fiery infant sacrifice.

As Israel cut off their supporting tithes, impoverished Levites had to scramble for employment. Jonathan, a descendant of Moses through Gershom, succumbed to the temptation to become priest for the silver idol worshipped by the tribe of Dan (Judges 17:1-18:31). “In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6).

Bereft of vigorous Levitical teaching of God’s law, a sodomite community took root in Gibeah of Benjamin. When sodomites gang-raped to death a Levite’s concubine, all Israel in horror declared “There was no such deed done nor seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out ... of Egypt” (Judges 19:30). Israel mobilized to “win” a near genocidal victory over Benjamin. This disaster led to state-authorized kidnaping. “In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes”(Judges 21:14-25).

In the wake of the mass kidnaping fiasco, Shiloh went into spiritual decline under Eli, the high priest. God condemned Eli’s descendants to poverty, since Eli had turned a blind eye to his sons’ sins of sacrilege and adultery. “And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left in thine house ... shall say, Put me, I pray thee, into one of the priests’ offices, that I may eat a piece of bread” (I Samuel 2:36). Eli lived to see the death of his sons and capture of the Ark that ended central worship in Israel (I Samuel 4:1-11). Israel went on with no central worship til it was restored at Jerusalem under King David, sweet singer of Israel (II Samuel 6:11-19).

After the Ark of God was miraculously returned to temporary quarters in Kirjathjearim, “all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD” (I Samuel 7:2). Then God raised up Samuel as prophet, priest and last Judge over Israel. For a full twenty years, Samuel sternly admonished Israel, “If ye do return unto the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the strange gods and Ashtaroth from among you, and prepare your hearts unto the LORD, and serve him only: and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines” (I Samuel 7:3).

Samuel's preaching ignited a revival in Israel that halted state-sanctioned infant sacrifice until King Solomon's idolatrous, inflation-plagued reign. "Then the children of Israel did put away Baalim and Ashtaroah, and served the LORD only. And Samuel said, Gather all Israel to Mizpeh, and I will pray for you unto the LORD" (I Samuel 7:4-5). Israel rallied to battle the Philistines. "The LORD thundered with a great thunder on that day upon the Philistines, and discomfited them; and they were smitten before Israel (I Samuel 7:10).

"Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer, saying, Hitherto hath the LORD helped us. So the Philistines were subdued, and they came no more into the coast of Israel: and the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel" (I Samuel 7:12-13).

Samuel became Israel's king maker. He anointed Saul as Israel's first king; and later, David, when Saul rebelled against God (I Samuel 15:23). Remarkably, in his emeritus years, Samuel established a community of prophets (I Samuel 19:20). This community of prophets was destined to serve in poverty but with powerful effect under Ahab and Jezebel, who worshiped Baal and often persecuted God's prophets to the death (I Kings 18:3-4).

Poverty and The Ministry II

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King Jeroboam declared at Bethel, "Behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt" (I Kings 12:28). Jeroboam subverted the Tithe to pay his state priests recruited from "the lowest of the people, which were not of the sons of Levi" (I Kings 12:31). "The Levites left their suburbs and their possession, and came to Judah and Jerusalem: for Jeroboam and his sons had cast them off from executing the priest's office" (II Chronicles 11:14). Thus began Israel's inexorable return to Baal worship under Ahab. They "caused their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire" (II Kings 17:17) and were doomed to captivity in Assyria.

The prophets, organized by Samuel, remained in Israel as a thorn in the side of the wicked kings through Ahab. Then, King Ahab's wicked queen, Jezebel, began to persecute God's prophets to death. But "Obadiah [who] feared the LORD greatly ... took an hundred prophets, and hid them by fifty in a cave, and fed them with bread and water" (I Kings 18:3-4). So, two communities of prophets survived, but they were effectively in jail, unable to preach or teach widely. Providentially, their families were learning to cope with poverty awaiting them outside of the cave. The 7,000 households whose heads had "not bowed unto Baal" needed instruction in God's Law, including the Lord's Tithe (I Kings 19:18). Prophetic penury was assured when prophets were released from their confinement after Elijah's fiery defeat of Baal's prophets at Mt. Carmel (I Kings 18:19-45).

Only Elisha's miraculous provision of a great store of cooking oil enabled a prophet's widow to pay her husband's creditors who threatened to enslave her sons" (II Kings 4:1-7). Then, "the sons of the prophets," gathering herbs during hard times, inadvertently poisoned their vital pottage with a shredded poisonous gourd. "They cried out ... O thou man of God, there is death in the pot. And they could not eat

thereof.” Elisha cleansed the pottage of its poison, “And there was no harm in the pot” (II Kings 4:40f). Further, Elisha, like Jesus with the “five loaves,” multiplied a firstfruits offering of twenty loaves of barley to feed 100 hungry men and their families. “Give the people, that they may eat: for thus saith the LORD, They shall eat, and shall leave thereof ... and they did eat, and left thereof, according to the word of the LORD” (II Kings 4:43-44; Matthew 14:15-21).

Despite their economic hardship “the sons of the prophets” remained faithful in their proclamation of “the word of the Lord” to hostile hearers. Thus, Micaiah, summoned to court, refused to join sychophantic prophets who predicted victory for King Ahab in his doomed campaign. “Go up to Ramothgilead, and prosper: for the LORD shall deliver it into the king's hand” (I Kings 22:12). Rather, Micaiah prophetically declared, “Behold, the LORD hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets, and the LORD hath spoken evil concerning thee.” Ahab furiously imprisoned Micaiah and marched off to his death at Ramothgilead (II Kings 22:23-37)!

The prophets were subjected to adamant rejection and varied pressures to abandon their prophetic ministry. “I raised up of your sons for prophets, and of your young men for Nazarites. ... But ye gave the Nazarites wine to drink; and commanded the prophets, saying, Prophecy not” (Amos 2:11-12). Some were also “tortured, not accepting deliverance; ... And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented” (Hebrews 11:35-37).

Israelites followed their kings into idolatrous immorality. And “God gave them up unto vile affections ... men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly ... filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness [and] maliciousness” (Romans 1:26-27, 29). Then God raised up King Josiah who, in a brief reign, “brake down the houses of the sodomites, that were by the house of the LORD ... And he defiled Topheth, ... in the valley of the children of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter to pass through the fire to Molech” (II Kings 23:7,10).

Finally, the Lord threatened and sent “a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD” (Hosea 8:11). For 430 years, no prophet came to declare “the word of the Lord.” Then God sent a prophet to Judea in fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet ... And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers” (Malachi 4:5-6). Jesus tells us this greatest prophet was John the Baptist (Matthew 17:11-12). He also declares the least of His fellow preachers is destined to be greater than this John (Matthew 11:11). Amen.