

Ba'al Worship

One of our homework passages this past week was about Saul's failure to follow through on God's command to attack the Amalekites. Through Samuel God reveals that it is time for the Amalekites to be punished for what they had done to Israel when they came up out of Egypt.¹ We looked at the related scripture passage that told us the Amalekites attacked those "*who were lagging behind*", and for their actions God would "*blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven*" (Deut. 25:17-19). In our homework we explored scriptures discussing God's mercy and his justice in regards to people who either turn from or persist in doing things wicked in the eyes of God. God always gives time for the ungodly to turn from their ways and follow him. It is his heart's desire that all men (and women) would turn from their sin and evil ways so that none shall be lost to him. John 3:16 sums up the Lord's whole salvation plan. "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" Paul too speaks of God's patience in permitting all people to turn from their ways. In Romans 2:4, while Paul is addressing the idea of refraining from judging the sins of others, he points out that we all have been given time to repent. Paul says, "*Or do you show contempt for the riches of [God's] kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?*" In kindness, tolerance and patience God gives us the time we need to repent. Sadly, there are those who given all the time in the world will still persist in their ways. The Amalekites are just such people. As we saw in our homework, "*they had no fear of God*" (Deut. 25:18). They refused to acknowledge that Yahweh was God, they had neither reverence nor dread at the mention of his name. They existed to steal, kill and destroy. Upon defeating the Amalekites Moses erected an altar as a reminder to all that the Amalekite's defeat was God's victory and that "*The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation.*" (Ex 17:16)

The Amalekites are more than just a physical danger to Israel, for that matter a number of tribes throughout Canaan are such a danger. God signals out specifically by name several groups who will be driven from the land, and a select few will be destroyed. The actions of the Amalekites give us some clues as to why God wanted them removed from the Land. We have already seen that they are a marauding people. In fact Saul's

¹ Exodus 17:8-15 tells the story of this encounter.

failure in this passage will come back to haunt David later. Not to give too much away, but 1 Samuel 30 tells of an Amalekite attack on David's settlement at Ziklag while David and his army are away. They return to find the settlement burned to the ground, and anything of value removed, including all of the women and children. David and his men despair over what they see. They have great reason to fear what has become of the women and children. The men with David are so distraught they turn on David with the intent to kill him. The fate of the women and children are of *grave* concern. Their future in the hands of the Amalekites is a fate *worse than death*.

Often times when we hear of God's plan to utterly destroy a Canaanite tribe to make way for the Israelites, we balk at the idea. It makes no sense to us. The reason for our inability to accept God's judgment often stems from a misconception on our part. In our time and society, we view most people as essentially good. We look at our non-Christian neighbors and think, "they're nice people...they don't do bad things...they just don't seem to need God." Let me tell you, these Amalekites, as we've already seen, aren't like your unbelieving but well intentioned neighbors, unless maybe you live on the Mexican borders and have Mexican drug lords as your neighbors. That is what these people were like. Everything about them had to do with stealing, killing and destruction.

Something we have to understand about the Canaanites², in particular tribes like the Amalekites, is that they are worshippers of Ba'al. Each Canaanite community had their own "version" of Ba'al, usually named after its city. Ba'al-peor for example, was Ba'al of Peor. Ba'al worship revolved around a dual understanding of the identity of Ba'al. He was both a sun-god, representing light, warmth and fertility, and he was also the opposing force, the storm-god demonstrated in droughts and storms that destroyed the land and food sources. Worship of this god entailed animal sacrifice as well as human sacrifice. To appease the aspect of the storm-god, humans would be burnt alive,³ ideally the first born son of the one offering the sacrifice, but not always, slaves, captives and children would be an acceptable substitute.

Ba'al worship focused around fertility and virility. Pagan tribes needed a strong male population to not only defend their own cities and settlements, but also to war against neighboring cities and settlements. The bull, representing strength and power was often associated with Ba'al. Bulls were sacrificed and consumed; even its blood was consumed in the belief that the life-force and power of the bull was retained in its blood. Having relations with the bull was also a method of appropriating its strength and power. This

² The terms Canaanite and Ammonite can refer in general to the various peoples of Canaan, or to specific people groups, as context implies.

³ 2 Kings 16:3 and 21:6 refer to this practice as to "pass through the fire".

was a violent masculine society that was about overpowering, destroying and taking everything from everyone, the strongest overpowering the weakest. Women and children suffered greatly from this overloaded testosterone driven society. There was no code of ethics by which everyone lived, as with the Israelites. There was no justice beyond whim of the king, the king who had likely stolen or murdered for his position.

Ba'al had a consort, Asherah (also Ashtoreth) who was a goddess of the womb, a fertility goddess. Fertility rites concerning both Ba'al and Asherah involved sexual immorality with temple prostitutes and *animals*, hence Yahweh's injunction in Exodus 22:19 regarding bestiality. When God instructed that nothing should survive the attack of the Amalekites, including its livestock, we can see why he wants nothing to do with it. Animals taken from the Amalekites would have been considered defiled and not be suitable for consumption or sacrifice to God.

Despite what the so-called sacred practices of Ba'al worship entailed, Ba'al worship was a massive temptation to Israel, a temptation to which they fell prey repeatedly throughout their history until the Assyrians carried off the Northern Kingdom, a judgment God permitted because Israel had so extensively bemired themselves in Ba'al worship. Later the Southern Kingdom too would go into Exile, but only for 70 years as God prepared a remnant to return to the Land swept of such idolatry. Why was this so overtly destructive, perverted religion a temptation? It appealed to the basest, most self-centered aspect of human nature.

Before entering the Promise Land God gave Israel a blueprint to stand up against the temptations they would face when they encountered Ba'al worship. God's plan requires concerted effort to stay focused on him in all things and all ways. Ba'al worship is a slippery slope that begins with simple and seemingly innocent or minor distraction that descends into a mire of filth, destruction and perversion. And we will see, Ba'al is as real a force now as it was then, even if the name has changed. Where God has established rules and laws for our protection that at times seem restrictive and even unfair, Ba'al offers the attitude that if it feels good, it is good. There are no consequences for our actions. Nothing is judged as unacceptable behavior if it makes you feel good.

Let me offer you a little insight into who Ba'al is. One of his names is Ba'al-zebub⁴, which means literally "Lord of the Flies". This name may be familiar to you, it is also the title of the book *Lord of the Flies*, a story depicting a group of British school children marooned on a desert island where all pretense of civilization is utterly lost and their society is one of death and destruction. I'm not saying it's a story of Ba'al worship, but the

⁴ 2 Kings 1:2

one identified in the Bible as the Lord of the Flies – Ba'alzebub, also Beelzub, is one and the same. He who makes himself known and worshiped in David's time under the name Ba'al, is in the time of Jesus, Beelzebub, (still meaning *The Lord of Flies*) Prince of demons⁵. Jesus even alludes to him as "*the thief [who] comes only to steal and kill and destroy*" in John 10:10. He is, in fact, Satan. Today not many would acknowledge worshipping Satan, and for those who do, it's pretty obvious and depraved. Satan in our day has much subtler means to ensnare and trap the souls for whom God sent his one and only son to redeem. He does still use some of the same lies and temptations as he did in the time of the Israelites, but most people in our day and age are too sophisticated to engage in old-time idol worship. Satan doesn't tempt with an alternative god such as Ba'al or Asherah, now the god is something altogether different. As I mentioned previously, God gave us a blueprint to stand up against the temptations of Satan or "the world" as we see it now. That blue print is contained most specifically within the Ten Commandments, but truly the whole Bible is that blue print. We'll take a look at the safety provisions within the Ten Commandments in comparison with the ways not only of historic Ba'al worship, but also a modern, or contemporary, Spirit of Ba'al at work in the world today.⁶ (See Ba'al Worship Chart.)

Historic Ba'al worship led to depravity, destruction and death. This was what Yahweh wanted to protect Israel from. Repeatedly throughout the Old Testament Yahweh warns Israel not to embrace the ways of the pagans, not to worship the Ba'als. He does so with good reason. It is difficult for us to comprehend what a Ba'al centric society must have been like 3,000 years ago. For us, in our day, the Spirit of Ba'al is much more subtly dressed. For the Canaanites in general, who as God describe it, their sins had not yet reached their fullness, but it was out in the open, it was the way of life; and, for groups like the Amalekites, in particular, there was no light of God in their society. It was fully corrupt, filthy, and destructive. It led to death – both physical and spiritual, complete separation from God. Tribes like the Amalekites were not your good-intentioned albeit misguided neighbors. They were the Mexican drug lords of their times: dangerous, oppressive, violent and murderous.

Ba'al is the polar opposite of everything God stands for. It is a slippery slope that starts with a little compromise here, a little there, before you are over-powered with the physical intoxication that comes with giving into temptation and illicit pleasures. It is hard to keep your eyes on God and to stay off the "slippery slope". It is hard work requiring concentration, deliberate action and discipline. And, it is exceedingly difficult to get back up the slope once you've started down. The more you descend, the more rapidly that spiral

⁵ Mark 3:22 and Luke 11:15-26

⁶ See Ba'al Worship Chart

carries you downward into filth and destruction. God says, "Keep your eyes on me and live according to the laws I've given you. They are for your protection, not for your enslavement." Ba'al says, "Your God is too demanding. He doesn't want you to have fun. He's old-fashioned, obsolete. Do what you want to do, do whatever feels good. You have a right to do as you please with your body and your life."

While we may not have the overt Ba'al worship of 3,000 years ago, it is still among us in the guise of secular fundamentalism which espouses an ideology of exalting what is best for society at the expense of personal liberty. Under the guise of secular fundamentalism Judeo-Christian values are denigrated, maligned and persecuted. The espoused toleration of *every* idea and belief system does not tolerate Judeo Christian morals or values which are frequently at odds with worldly values. Secular fundamentalism is more intolerant than the belief system it persecutes. The secular fundamentalist view point that all belief systems are acceptable (as long as you accept *and condone* the validity of all belief systems) opens the door to legitimizing behaviors and activities that a generation or two ago would have easily been recognized and named as immoral. Now every immorality is "acceptable", and even promoted as "normal". In our modern era we are seeing the fulfillment of what Paul wrote about in Romans 1:21-32:

²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵ They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator--who is forever praised. Amen.

²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

²⁸ Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; ³¹ they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

*A Woman After God's Own Heart:
A Study of King David
Lesson 1 : Session Notes*