

into discussion

Ask everyone to give a brief answer to the question “When you were a child, what did you most want to be when you grew up?”

into God’s presence

Today we are going to use the words of a wonderful hymn to lead us into praise. By all means sing it together if you wish, otherwise just read the words. Either way, pause after each verse and allow the words you have said or sung to inspire prayers of praise, thanks or supplication.

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
Be all else but naught to me, save that Thou art;
Be Thou my best thought in the day and the night,
Both waking and sleeping, Thy presence my light.

Be Thou my wisdom, be Thou my true word,
Be Thou ever with me, and I with Thee, Lord;
Be Thou my great Father, and I Thy true son;
Be Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.

Be Thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
Be Thou my whole armour, be Thou my true might;

Be Thou my soul’s shelter, be Thou my strong tower:
O raise Thou me heavenward, great Power of my power.

Riches I need not, nor man’s empty praise:
Be Thou mine inheritance now and always;
Be Thou and Thou only the first in my heart:
O Sovereign of heaven, my treasure Thou art.

High King of heaven, Thou heaven’s bright Sun,
O grant me its joys after victory is won;
Great Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be Thou my vision, O Ruler of all.

into God’s word

Read 1 Samuel 13:1-15 and think about the following questions together:

- Why do you imagine Saul sent part of his initial raiding party home?
- Why would Saul have been so concerned about the need to present a burnt offering?
- Imagine that you were in the position of a lawyer attempting to defend Saul for his decision to offer the sacrifice himself. What arguments could you make to support the course of action he chose?
- Do you think God judged Saul harshly? Try to explain your answer.
- Have you known situations where doing what appeared logical or best would have meant disobeying God? What did you do?
- There is a similar incident recorded in 1 Samuel 15. We are not going to attempt to study that whole chapter here, but read Samuel’s words to Saul in verses 22-23 of chapter 15. Reflect for a minute on the impact that such words would have had upon people whose whole expression of faith revolved around performing the right sacrifices at the appointed times.

into life

Do you think that there are situations where, either as individuals or as a church, we become so absorbed in a religious habit or tradition that we risk losing the immediacy of hearing God’s voice and obeying Him?

Turn your discussion into prayer.

back-page background

The land of Philistia was a relatively small region on the south west coast of Palestine, surrounding the towns of Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron and Gath. The Philistine people, who were descended from Noah's son Ham (see Genesis 10:14), were already settled and established in the area when the Israelites came out of Egypt. Even as far back as that they had a reputation for being fiercely warlike. Exodus 13:17 records: When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt."

Throughout the time of the Judges there were repeated skirmishes and wars between the Philistines and the people of Israel. Samson, one of Israel's greatest judges (Judges chapters 13-16), both married a Philistine woman and then later went to battle against the Philistine people, ultimately killing hundreds of them as well as himself in the destruction of Dagon's temple.

By the time Saul came to power, Israel and the Philistines were old enemies. In fact, it may well have been the ongoing war between them which left so many of the Israelites crying out

for a military leader in the person of a king. Philistine armies had captured the Ark of the Covenant in a battle at Aphek (1 Samuel 4),

which would have been a huge blow to national pride. By the time of the incident we are studying today the Ark had been returned, but the memory would still have stung, as would the continuing Philistine oppression. To protect their position of military superiority they had even tried to limit any access to iron weapons (1 Samuel 13:19-22) so that when Israel did rise up they did so with almost no weaponry at their disposal.

Saul did defeat them, as 1 Samuel 14 records, but it was not a resounding victory and the Philistines continued to dog Israel for many more years. King David also crossed swords with them, defeating their champion warrior Goliath in his youth and then defeating them far more soundly after his coronation as king (2 Samuel 5:17-15).

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