

1 Samuel 7:2-17

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is from 1 Samuel chapter 7, beginning at verse 2 and to the end of the chapter, and that's on page 277.

The ark remained at Kiriath-Jerim a long time, twenty years in all. Then all of the people of Israel turned back to the Lord. So Samuel said to all the Israelites, If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths, and commit yourselves to the Lord, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.

So the Israelites put away their bales and Ashtoreths, and served the Lord only. Then Samuel said, Assemble all Israel at Mizpah, and I will intercede with the Lord for you.

When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord. On that day they fasted, and there they confessed, We have sinned against the Lord.

Now Samuel was serving as leader of Israel at Mizpah. When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled at Mizpah, the rulers of the Philistines came up to attack them. When the Israelites heard of it, they were afraid because of the Philistines.

[1 : 20] They said to Samuel, Do not stop crying out to the Lord our God for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines. Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and sacrificed it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord.

He cried out to the Lord on Israel's behalf, and the Lord answered him. While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle.

But that day the Lord thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines, and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites. The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth-kar.

Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, Thus far the Lord has helped us. So the Philistines were subdued, and they stopped invading Israel's territory.

Throughout Samuel's lifetime, the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines. The towns from Ekron to Gath that the Philistines had captured from Israel were restored to Israel, and Israel delivered the neighbouring territory from the hands of the Philistines, and there was peace between Israel and the Amorites.

[2 : 36] Samuel continued as Israel's leader all the days of his life. From year to year he went on a circuit from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah, judging Israel in all those places.

But he always went back to Ramah, where his home was, and there he also held court for Israel, and he built an altar there to the Lord. Great, thanks Katrina for reading that.

And if you could keep your Bibles open at page 277, that would be a great help as we look at God's Word together. And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet, if you'd find that helpful, just to follow as we go along through this portion of the Bible.

Let's ask for God's help. Let's pray. We read the promise in Psalm 19, The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous.

They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold. They are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb. We praise you, Heavenly Father, for the gift of your Word, and we ask that this morning, wherever we stand with you, however much we've thought about these things before, that by your grace we would experience the reality of that promise, that we would find your Word to be of great value to us, and of great sweetness to us, and you'll move us to respond rightly.

[4 : 02] For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, in this morning's Bible reading, we're thinking about how we respond to God, and how to keep responding rightly to God.

How we respond to someone demonstrates and reflects what we think of them. Last week I heard about Etienne Constable, a man in California. I don't know if you saw this in the news.

He kept a boat on his driveway, and neighbors complained, because it was against local regulations. And he was ordered by city officials to move the boat back up his drive, and screen it with a six-foot fence.

So to comply with the rule, he put up this. Just got a picture. So it might look to you as though the boat is still there, but the boat is actually behind a fence.

And what we can see there is the fence. But he got a mural artist to paint the boat on the fence, so that it still looks exactly the same for passers-by.

[5 : 04] So he obeyed the letter of the command, but his action shows what he really thinks of the city council and its regulations. So how we respond to someone, especially someone in authority over us, demonstrates and reflects what we really think of them.

Now we're in this series in 1 Samuel, and Samuel was a prophet and leader of God's people in the 11th century BC. God's people are living in the Promised Land, and during this season, before they had a king, they were ruled by a series of judges.

So not judges in the kind of courtroom sense, but these judges were the political and spiritual leaders of the people in a succession. And before Samuel, there was a disastrous one called Eli, and him and his sons were judged by God and taken away, put to death, because they were unrepentant in their faithless leadership of God's people and their corruption.

But this morning, in contrast, we're seeing Israel under a good judge, under Samuel. And we see in him today exactly the kind of leader that God's people need.

So the big idea in 1 and 2 Samuel is God's people are learning about the kind of king that we need over us. And in Samuel, in chapter 7 here, we see qualities that we would need to look for in the ideal spiritual leader and king for God's people.

[6 : 32] So he leads the people in responding rightly to a holy God, then in experiencing a saving God, and then in remembering the help of a faithful God.

So first, let's see them responding rightly to a holy God. Let's pick things up again at verse 2. If you look halfway through verse 2, I know it's separated by a heading in our Bibles there, but it says, then all the people of Israel turned back to the Lord.

What's going on? They're responding to God with repentance, with turning back to God. Now that might not sound so remarkable to us, the idea of people repenting, turning back to God.

But for those of us who've been in this series in 1 Samuel, this is a profound moment. Because what we've seen is that so far in 1 Samuel, that has not been how the people have responded to God.

In fact, to the extent God moved out, he moved away from the promised land and his people. And the way that was symbolized at that time was that the Philistines, who were a neighboring invading army, captured the Ark of the Covenant.

[7 : 38] The Ark was a wooden box, overlaid with gold, that symbolized, it was the epicenter of the presence of God among his people.

When the people saw the Ark, they were to think about God being their king, because he was enthroned above the Ark. They were to think about God being a speaking God, because his Ten Commandments were inside the Ark.

And they were to remember the mercy of God, that he'd come to dwell with his people. And the Ark of the Covenant was taken by the Philistines, because the people have rejected God, and he moved away.

Years went by, and then last week, we saw in chapter 6, that the Ark of the Covenant came back among the people. But so far, what we see are two wrong responses to God, before we get this right response of repentance.

And the first wrong response was disobedience, disobedience of God's commands. The Ark comes back, and the first place it goes, is in chapter 6, verse 20.

[8 : 41] Just look back there. Verse 19. It went to Beth Shemesh, and the people look into the Ark, which is clearly against God's specific command.

They're not allowed to look into it. And so because they look into the Ark, 70 of them are put to death. If you disobey God's commands, whoever you are, you come under the judgment of God.

And so they ask the question of chapter 6, verse 20. We just look there. Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God? To whom will the Ark go up from here?

So even though God is glorious, here at this point, they're treating God a bit like the bomb in the game Pass the Bomb. If you've ever played that game, we've got that family game. You press a button on this plastic thing, and it's ticking, and the object of the game is not to end up with the bomb.

So you keep passing it around the group. And here, the people of God are trying to push the presence of God away from them, because with unrepentant hearts, the presence of God is something to be afraid of, and they're pushing him away.

[9 : 43] But then they find another place for it. It gets moved to this place, Kiriath-Jerim, and we see the second wrong response to God's presence, which is idolatry. So it goes to the house of a man called Abinadab, and then we catch up with it in verse 2, the start of our reading that we had today.

Verse 2 of chapter 7, the Ark remained at Kiriath-Jerim a long time, 20 years in all. What's going on? It looks peaceful. The Ark is back with the people, 20 years go by.

But if we look on to verse 4, Samuel tells Israel, after 20 years, to put away their Baals and Ashtoreths.

They were statues and icons of pagan gods, false gods, that the people would have had in their homes and their villages, worshipping the gods of the nations around them.

So what's been happening all these 20 years that the presence of God is back among his people? They're just going on with the idolatry of the people around them, building their lives on the same things, the same hopes and fears and dreams.

[10 : 54] When I was growing up, we had a classic car in our family. My dad had bought it. It was a 1972 Rover P5. It was his dream. It was his passion. And it rarely ever worked.

There was always something wrong with it. I remember him taking me with him to get an MOT on the car and the mechanic saying, it's bad news, I'm afraid.

And him saying, oh, I knew it would fail. And that was basically what it was like having this car. Most of the time, it looked like this. If you look at the next picture, Joanne, there.

That's not actually my dad. I just found that freely available online. But it could easily have been. He was often looking like that. So we admired the beauty of the car, but it got in the way of normal life.

It was not functional. And one day, my dad spoke to a farmer friend and found out he had a lockup garage free on his farm. And the P5 was taken there. And it was locked away.

[11 : 53] For months and months, we just left it there. We think of it from time to time, but it was peripheral to our lives, out of the way. And Israel here has effectively put the ark in a lockup garage at Abinadab's place.

Because God is peripheral to their lives. He is weightless to them. He doesn't press in on them as a glorious king. And 20 years go by. So it's good for us to reflect, at this point, on these wrong responses to God.

And examine ourselves against them. Could we be here this morning willing to say, I'm a Christian, but actually, we're conscious. There is an area of our life where we are in ongoing, clear disobedience to God.

And the Spirit of God is prompting us to bring that out into the open before God and turn from it. Or with this idea of idolatry among the people, when the ark was at Abinadab's house, could we find ourselves in a position where, really, we'd have to admit, God is on the edge of my life.

Instead of seeing him as your gracious helper so that your faith in him is lively and active, you see him as getting in the way of the busyness of normal life.

[13 : 10] And so you push him out to the edge while you run after other things, living for the things the people around us live for that choke up your walk with God. Well, how we respond to God demonstrates what we think of him.

And that was Israel for 20 years. But what happens in our passage this morning is a national revival. It's a wonderful thing. It would have been a wonderful thing to live through if you were there.

And it's a model for us of true repentance. First of all, there's sadness. We get that in verse 2, the second half there. It says, then all the people of Israel turned back to the Lord.

But that would be better translated at that point. All of Israel lamented before the Lord. They were sad. And you can be sad about your sin without truly repenting of your sin.

You can be sad about your sin because you're living with the damage that it's done in your life, in broken relationships, or in shame before other people who found out that you did the wrong thing.

[14 : 13] Or you can be sad about sin that's led to loss of money in your life. Anything. That's different from being sad about it because you acknowledge that God is grieved by what you've done.

And in true repentance, we turn away from our idolatry, what we've done, the way we've lived, our false worship. So in verse 3, Samuel picks up on that lamentation.

And verse 3, Samuel said to all the Israelites, So there's this turning away, this putting to death, living for other things.

And most of us wouldn't find shrines to pagan gods in our homes. But for us, putting away our idolatry would be about acknowledging the things that have become more central in our lives than the living God.

When you look at what really excites you, or you look at what you most fear because you think you couldn't live without it, or you look at what you're really dreaming about or yearning for, it shows us whether there are things in our life that are more important to us than God, shaping our behavior as we live for those things.

[15 : 33] Put them away. And then the other side to repentance is to lean your whole weight on God. Verse 3, Samuel says, Commit yourselves to the Lord and serve Him only.

God calls for our exclusive worship. And He's worth it. So we see Samuel end that call with a promise in verse 3 to the people. If they do that, He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.

And the Philistines were this horrible threat to the people. In chapter 4, we heard about them slaughtering 30,000 Israelites in one battle, bent on removing the Israelites from the land.

But God promises His people, if they will only trust Him faithfully and stick with Him, if they turn their hearts towards Him, He will deliver them.

He will keep them safe. And the people respond. The nation all gather together in one place in Mizpah. It must have been an amazing thing to experience. And in verse 6b, we pick things up.

[16 : 36] On that day, they fasted, and there they confessed. We have sinned against the Lord. So they fast, they pray, and there's this sincere, hearty repentance.

And today, we have a spiritual leader who calls us to do the same. In the first words, Mark records Jesus announcing in His adult ministry, Jesus says, the time has come, the kingdom of God is near, repent, and believe the good news.

Jesus' message is a gospel of repentance. He says in Luke chapter 24, when He's risen again after He died, and He's commissioning the disciples and promising the Spirit, He says, repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations.

So that's our first point, responding to a holy God. And today is a great day to ask ourselves, how am I responding to a holy God? The thing is, we might not want to return to God like that, wholeheartedly, like Israel did under Samuel.

So it's important for us to see that God is worth trusting, and we see that in the rest of the chapter. So our second point is about experiencing a saving God. There's this great immediate test for the people.

[17 : 52] The Philistines attack them while they're gathering at Mizpah. It must have been a horrific thing. You picture them all gathered, praising God together, fasting, praying, sincerity, and they hear a noise.

And then it's unmistakable. There's an army approaching. The Philistines know where they are. And they've come to annihilate them. But instead of picking up weapons to fight, or scattering and fleeing for the hills, they know it's the Lord they need as their helper.

And so look at verse 8. They said to Samuel, do not stop crying out to the Lord for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines.

Samuel offers a sacrifice to the Lord in verse 9, and he cries out to the Lord in prayer for the people. And in verse 10 we read this. Verse 10b, That day the Lord thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites.

That's the key point going on in the battle. This was God's supernatural deliverance. Israel has to follow it up with some mopping up after the victory, and it's gruesome.

[19 : 07] But these are people who were bent on massacre against Israel, and the Lord has saved them. It's just what God said he's like in chapter 2 of 1 Samuel.

We had Hannah's song, which is like a key that unlocks the whole book. And in Hannah's song, in chapter 2 verse 9, we read this. The Most High will thunder from heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth.

And here in chapter 7 verse 10, as Israel depended on God, he thundered against the enemies and terrified them, and they fled. And the message for us is that God is the one you want as your helper.

God is the one to trust and turn from idols to trust. It's costly to repent. Jesus describes a way of life that looks like his. He lived his life in costly service of others, and that is what the Christian life looks like.

Turning away from the gods of the people around us, money, sex, power, popularity, comfort. Those things seem fulfilling and satisfying, and God calls us to turn from them and serve him alone.

[20 : 16] It's costly. But the result is, God is your helper, and he gives peace. So look at verse 13. The Philistines were subdued, and they stopped invading Israel's territory.

And then at the end of verse 14, we read, there was peace between Israel and the Amorites, another enemy. In other words, during Samuel's lifetime, this becomes a golden age for the people of God.

God promises his people, you will have peace if you trust me. And today, it's not the Philistines who are a danger to us, and our relationship with God is not kind of tied to the land in the same kind of way as theirs was under the old covenant.

But we all need peace in our lives, the wholeness and harmony that our hearts were made for, that comes from being in a right relationship with God. And Jesus can give us that peace.

He will give us that peace when we turn to him. The hymn we'll sing later, Come Now Fount of Every Blessing, was written by Robert Robinson in the 18th century.

[21 : 22] His dad died when he was eight years old, and from an early age, he had to work in terrible conditions to support himself and his mother. But when he was 22, he heard a man preach the gospel, George Whitefield, who God used in Scotland and England to bring revival.

And Robert Robinson turned back to God that day, and he wrote this hymn, Come Now Fount of Every Blessing, because his eyes had been opened to the goodness of God, and it moved him to repent.

So he even, we sing in that song, he says to God, Let thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee. It was as he experienced the goodness of God that it kind of fettered him in and held him to trust God.

And that's what we need to trust, that God is good and loving, that it binds our heart. The writer Ashley Null puts it like this, he talks about how when the Spirit of God opens your heart to see God's love in his salvation plan in Jesus, his love for you, it's as though Jesus wraps you in a warm embrace, so loving, that it changes your heart and all you could do is repent.

It's irresistible grace. And we see a glimpse of that goodness of God here, as we think, what did it take for God to save Israel here? They had to repent, we've seen that, but more than that, they also needed someone to stand in the gap between them and God.

[22 : 55] And Samuel did that for them. Just look at verse 9. Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and sacrificed it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. He cried out to the Lord on Israel's behalf and the Lord answered him.

The people needed someone to stand in the gap between them and God, a mediator with a sacrifice. And for us, Samuel's great leadership there foreshadows the far greater love of Jesus Christ as our leader, one who stands in the gap, not pleading, not bringing a lamb as an offering because he himself is the lamb, the lamb of God who took away the sin of the world when he freely chose the cross.

And who lives today in Hebrews 7 says Jesus is able to save completely those who trust him because he intercedes for us. He is before our heavenly father now praying for us.

We heard Ewan speak this morning of that experience of a saving God, of finding the goodness of God and it moving someone to repent, to turn back to him.

And once we've experienced that, how do we keep going firm in trusting God? Well, that's our third point. The third thing Samuel does, Samuel leads Israel in remembering a faithful God, remembering a faithful God.

[24 : 20] So you can see standing stones in different places around Scotland today. On Lewis, there's the Callanish stones. I probably just mispronounced that but I was corrected at the 9.30 for how I pronounced it.

We've got a picture of them. The Stonehenge of the north. There they are. Nobody knows why they're there. There's lots of theories.

The next picture is of the standing stones in Orkney, probably the oldest ones in Scotland, maybe 5,000 years old. No one knows why they're there. Plenty of theories.

Because when you walk around standing stones like that, it makes you want to know more about the people who put them there. Who were they? Why did they put them here? And Samuel wants those kind of questions to be asked by Israel for generations to come about the stone that he lays.

So look at verse 12. Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, which means stone of help, saying, Thus far, the Lord has helped us.

[25 : 30] Why mark God's help like this? Well, because Israel has been stuck all through its history since Moses in a cycle of God delivering them, them enjoying rest, and then they forget God.

And they turn to idols, and then they come into God's judgment, and enemies invade, and then they cry out to God in their distress, and God raises up a deliverer and saves them, and they enjoy rest, and then they forget again.

And they need to stop forgetting. Their hearts are bent on drifting from God, because that's the human heart. If only it was the other way around.

If only the longer you left us without any influence, our hearts would drift towards God. But they drift away from Him. So Samuel makes sure there's a stone that people will walk past, and when the children see the stone, they can say to their parents, What's that stone there for?

And the parents can say, Oh, it's so that we remember the Lord is our helper. Thus far, the Lord has helped us. It's striking to see him put up this stone now, because partly you wonder, What is he referring to?

[26 : 37] Because in his lifetime, and the lifetime of the people around them, it's been difficult being in Israel. The last thing to get named before this stone was a baby they called Ichabod, because it means, Where is the glory?

Because the glory of God had departed from the people. And the ark went, and they lost his presence, and they've come under judgment. But now, already, they can look back, and they can see that God's sovereign hand was at work helping them to get to this point where they would trust God, and he would save them and keep them secure.

When they see the stone, they can remember and reflect. And we today can drift from God because we forget. We forget how he's helped us in the past.

So just as Samuel, the leader, gave Israel a way to remember, so we have a leader who has given us a way to remember. The cross is where we see, thus far, the Lord has helped us.

That when we were most in need, God sent Jesus to save us. And Jesus has given us the Lord's Supper as our Ebenezer stone to look back at the cross with.

[27 : 51] One scholar on 1 Samuel asked his church if where they have their communion table, where they serve the bread and wine from at the Lord's Supper, and it has the line, do this in remembrance of me there, the words of Jesus.

And he asked if they could put a sign underneath it, saying, thus far, the Lord has helped us. This is our place to reflect and remember. When we share bread and wine, when we look back at the cross, we can say like the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8, whatever we're facing, he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

At the Ebenezer stone, here are the people of God standing in the present, reflecting on the past so that they can be steadfast for the future.

And it shows us the value, the importance of taking the time to reflect on God's help to us in our own lives so far. Jonathan, our assistant minister, he treats the cobbler, the mountain in the Arica Alps as his Ebenezer stone, and at least once a year, he climbs it and he just takes a day out to reflect as he's climbing on the ways that God has looked after him so far in his life.

Thus far, the Lord is my helper. And it's good for us to remember this lesson as a church. It's so easy to look ahead and think, I just don't know how we're ever going to manage. I don't know how we're going to get through next year.

[29 : 23] Some great people will move on this year from the church. People who are serving wholeheartedly. People will think, I don't know how we'll do without them. It happens every year to us. And we might see so many obstacles in our mission to make Jesus known in Glasgow.

Legislation looming in Parliament that would make it harder to preach the gospel. Proposed parking charges that will make it really expensive to meet together. The people around us, we long would come to church.

Their Sundays are full of sport and shopping and entertainment. Schools don't want Christians to come in and speak about Jesus. Islam is really strong in Muslim communities.

Obstacles. Obstacles. But we need to remember that even if everything else was against us, the one and only thing we need is to be right with God.

For if he is our helper, we will lack nothing. And he has been our helper. He has been our helper. We just need to look back at just in recent years through the pandemic and how God was our helper through that.

[30 : 30] Through leaving a denomination, which we did five years ago. Through tragedies that we faced, personal tragedies, griefs, afflictions that we've had to walk with one another through.

Through those things, we can look around as a church and think, people have come to know Jesus. They've been saved. We've grown in knowing God better.

He's been with us. Thus far, the Lord has helped us. Let's hear Jesus invite us afresh this morning to turn back to our holy God so that we experience a saving God and we remember he is a faithful God.

Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Gracious Father, we praise you for the Lord Jesus, that he is the leader we need.

Samuel said to all Israel, if you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only and he will deliver you.

[31 : 52] Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that by Jesus' sacrifice and his prayerful intercession, we can draw near to you with confidence and hear your gracious call to repent and experience your salvation.

we acknowledge that we haven't put you first in our lives and in our hearts. Your concerns have not weighed in on us as they should.

Instead, we get mixed up instead with the idols of our age, living for the things that the people around us live for. So we turn back to you today.

By your spirit, move us, we pray, to true, earnest repentance. Thank you that as we see the cross and reflect on your gracious helping hand at work in our own lives, we can genuinely say, thus far, the Lord has helped us.

Would we remain steadfast for the future, confident that with you as our helper, we have nothing to fear. We ask for Jesus' name's sake. Amen.

[32 : 59] Amen.