

## RAISING EBENEZER

1 Samuel 7:3-17

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

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Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer; for he said, "Till now the Lord has helped us" (1 Sam. 7:12).

**T**wenty years have passed since the Ark of the Covenant was lost to Israel. Their leaders sought to use God's holy Ark as a military superweapon, without first humbling themselves before the Lord or seeking his will. God gave Israel over to defeat with great slaughter and his Ark fell into Philistine hands. Seven months later, God had inflicted such wrath on the Philistines that they sent the Ark back to Israel, where it remained in an obscure border village. For twenty years, the Philistines maintained their domination over God's people. Israel was reduced to virtual serfdom, forbidden by the Philistines to employ blacksmiths, lest Israelite plowshares should be beaten into swords and their enemies maintaining forts deep in Israel's territory (cf. 1 Sam. 13:19-14:5).

We may wonder where Samuel was in all these events. He would probably have been present at Shiloh when news of Israel's defeat came and Eli the high priest died, and he probably returned to his home in Ramah when Shiloh was destroyed. Over the twenty years, Samuel must have prayed and urged Israel to return to the Lord. The last words of 1 Samuel 7:2 provide the words Samuel was waiting for: "all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD." Twenty years of oppression had made Israel miss God's loving care and even to lament the absence of the Lord himself. The apostle Paul says that "godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation" (2 Cor. 7:10). To see if this was true, godly grief, Samuel came forth to urge the people to return to the Lord. "If you are returning to the Lord

with all your heart,” he called out, more as a challenge than a question. Rather than a fleeting remorse, Samuel sought to lead Israel in true repentance so as to restore the people to the Lord.

## RETURNING TO THE LORD

A number of years ago, a billboard was put up near my home with a message from the local diocese of the Roman Catholic Church.

The billboard presented a picture of a wistful young woman looking distressed and it read, “If you think you can’t make it right, you’re wrong.” Protestants will no doubt quarrel with some of the theology behind that Catholic message, but its main point is one that all Christians can embrace: you can always come back to God.

As proof of this principle, we should consider Samuel’s message to the fallen people of Israel. So intensely had they and their leaders offended God that he departed from them by sending away the Ark of the Covenant. The Lord gave them over to destruction, so that the name “Ichabod” (meaning, “the glory has departed”) was rightly spoken of them. They had abandoned the true God for idols, indulging in gross sins, and in consequence they had fallen into bondage and misery. So it ever is with sin. Jesus said, “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (Jn. 8:34), and Paul wrote, “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). Sin leads to a miserable slavery that ends in death. So how can there be hope for sinners like the Israelites, who have offended God?

The answer is the mercy of God, who always welcomes sinners back when they come humbly seeking grace. God says: “Return to me, . . . and I will return to you” (Zech. 1:3). It was with this grace in mind that Samuel spoke to Israel about returning to the Lord: “And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, “If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart” (1 Sam. 7:3). This is the appeal that God has always made to those who are fallen in sin.

Samuel understood that repentance involves far more than feeling sorry about our sin. Most people are sorry only that they got caught sinning or for the misery have experienced as a result. But true repentance begins by being sorry over the sin itself and goes on forsake sin so as to turn to God in new obedience. Israel’s chief sin had been idolatry, so Samuel declared to the people: “If you are

returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you” (1 Sam. 7:3).

This command involved far more than throwing a few statues into a ditch. Idolatry, then as now, involved a whole way of life. Verse 4 refers to “the Baals and the Ashtaroth.” These Canaanite “foreign gods” (v. 3) were linked to the vital matter of fertility, so that through their worship one hoped to secure rains and abundant crops. Baal was the Canaanite storm god and Asherah was his wife. It is possible that Asherah was considered a consort to Yahweh, Israel’s God. The idea of needing a feminine counterpart to the masculine god is pervasive in idolatry; a contemporary example is the Roman Catholic veneration of Mary as co-redemptrix with Christ.

To abandon the Baalim and the Ashtaroth required two difficult things. First, the Israelites had to reject the ways that were fashionable and widespread in their time. To worship the God of the Bible required them to be different and separate from the idolatrous world. Likewise, anyone who wants to follow Jesus Christ today simply cannot fit into the ways of the world. The world has its definition of success and its approach to the problems of life that is completely different God and his people. John reminds us that “all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions – is not from the Father but is from the world” (1 Jn. 2:15-16). Thus, James warns believers that worldliness is idolatry: “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Ja. 4:4).

Added to the difficulty of being different is the reality that idol worship was sensually appealing. The worship of Baal and Asherah involved offerings to them of ritual sex so as to leverage their powers for fertility. Many Israelites thought this was a more enjoyable way of getting crops to grow than holding a prayer meeting. Since the ways of sin so naturally appeal to our corrupt natures, Dale Ralph Davis points out that “no superficial – only a supernatural – repentance would break such bondage.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *I Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 58.

This is why Samuel joins the turning from idols with whole-hearted devotion to the Lord: “direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only” (1 Sam. 4:3). Single-minded devotion to the Lord requires our forsaking of false gods and our turning from sin. But Samuel realizes that the power for repentance comes from a new fervor for the Lord. We not only forsake the darkness but we come to walk in the light. The power to turn from sin comes from seeing the glory of the Lord as the true God and the blessing of his salvation as our only true hope.

This is why Samuel added a promise of blessing to his call to repentance, since it is the gospel hope that empowers our turning from sin. “He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines,” Samuel promised (1 Sam. 7:3). Since God had given Israel over so as to give them remorse over their sin, true repentance would restore God’s blessing and help. Christians should realize that this is the way for us to enjoy the fullness of God’s power and blessing: by turning from the idolatry of our sins and whole-heartedly serving the Lord.

The sincerity of Israel’s longing for God is seen in their response: “So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and they served the LORD only” (1 Sam. 7:4). The word “served” refers in this context to worship: they worshiped the Lord only. This reminds us that our lifestyles are really matters of worship. People today worship the idols of self and pleasure, and their life-styles show it. Jesus said, “You cannot serve God and money” (Mt. 6:24). The lifestyle of idolatry is one of taking, whereas God calls his people to giving; the gods of this world teach us to dominate others, whereas the true God calls us to a lifestyle of sacrifice and service. In such things our true religion is seen. As Israel turned back to the Lord, a long era of sinful idolatry was drawing to a close and new day of blessing was dawning.

Samuel’s call to repentance directly challenges some of the messages heard in the church today. We are living in a time when carnal entertainment and worldly inducements – some of them so sensual as to invoke comparisons with Baal and Asherah worship – are widely employed to persuade people to come to church. Large crowds gathered through worldly means are then cited as evidence of a spiritual revival, so that reluctant Christians should put aside their biblical objections and get on board. But Samuel’s teaching reminds us that true spiritual renewal is always accompanied by repentance

from worldliness and sin, just as true revival also bears fruit in the reformation of Christ's church according to God's Word. Absent true repentance from sin and reformation in the church, we have no biblical basis for claiming to enjoy a revival. Rather than relying on marketing strategies taught by the world, how much better would it be for us to follow Samuel's example in calling forth the Word of God so as to lead sinners to repent and come for mercy in Christ.

The same is true on a personal level: spiritual revival is always joined to a passion for holiness. Thus, each of us should see our love for sin as the chief barrier to our spiritual blessing. One of the best prayers we can offer is the supplication in William Cowper's hymn, "O For a Closer Walk with God":

The dearest idol I have known,  
Whate'er that idol be,  
Help me to tear it from Thy throne,  
And worship only Thee.<sup>2</sup>

## RESTORATION AT MIZPAH

**I**ndividual sins should be confessed and repented on an individual basis. But there are national and church sins that should be repented of as a nation and as a church. Moreover, it is proper for congregations, as they seek God's blessing in worship, to confess together the guilt of their sin. So it was that Samuel summoned the people to assemble at Mizpah, a traditional meeting place about five miles north of Jerusalem. "Gather all Israel at Mizpah," Sameul said, "and I will pray to the LORD for you" (1 Sam. 7:5).

When the people had gathered, they responded in a couple of actions designed to express their contrition over sin. The first was that they "drew water and poured it out before the LORD" (1 Sam. 7:6). The meaning of this gesture is not entirely clear. Robert Bergen supposes that they "were denying themselves liquids as a symbolic confession that the Lord's favor was more important to them than life-sustaining water."<sup>3</sup> William Blaikie sees it as "a symbol of pouring out before

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<sup>2</sup> William Cowper, "O for a Closer Walk with God," 1779.

<sup>3</sup> Robert D. Bergen, *I, 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 107.

God confessions of sin drawn from the depths of the heart.”<sup>4</sup> To this was added public fasting, the purpose of which was to express special humiliation and grief for sin (cf. 2 Sam. 12:21; 1 Ki. 21:27; Zech. 8:10; Dan. 10:2). In these ways, the Israelites came before the Lord declaring their eager readiness to receive his renewing grace. There can be little doubt of the sincerity, fervor, and grief poured out in their words, spoken together as a people, “We have sinned against the LORD” (1 Sam. 7:6). Blaikie writes: “They humbled themselves before God in deep conviction of their unworthiness, and being thus emptied of self they were in a better state to receive the gracious visitation of love and mercy.”<sup>5</sup>

We can understand why the Israelites would humble themselves and confess their sins: twenty years of chastisement had prompted their contrition. But it is not obvious why God would accept their confession and forgive their sins. The same is true for us: even a brief glimpse of God’s holy character makes confession of sin imperative for us. But why is forgiveness imperative for God?

The answer is seen at Mizpah, where Samuel mediated for Israel before the Lord. “Gather,” Samuel had called, “and I will pray to the LORD for you” (1 Sam. 7:5). Serving in his priestly capacity, Samuel was appointed to represent the people to God and God to the people. We should note the contrast here with the prior situation in Shiloh: it was for want of godly priests – Eli’s sons being rejected for their wickedness – that Israel was abandoned by God. Now there is a true and godly priest, and the people are restored to God’s favor.

But it was not merely who Samuel was that brought reconciliation with God: it was also what Samuel did. “Samuel took a nursing lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. And Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him” (1 Sam. 7:9).

Samuel first offered a sacrifice to atone for the peoples’ sins. This is the only way that sinners can be forgiven by God and restored to his favor. The Bible says that “without the shedding of blood there is no

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<sup>4</sup> William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 91.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

forgiveness of sins” (Heb. 9:22), for the simple reason that sin against God is deserving of death. When God forbade Adam from eating from the forbidden tree, he warned that “in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17). Thus every transgression of God’s law requires the penalty of death, for sin cannot be permitted to abide in God’s holy presence. But God in his mercy has made a way of forgiveness, through the substitute of another to pay the penalty for sin. That substitute – symbolized in the Old Testament by sacrificial animals – is God’s own Son who came into the world to “save his people from their sins” (Mt. 1:21).

This is the message that Christians bear before the world: there is forgiveness through the atoning blood of Christ. There is no other way that will bring sinful men and women into God’s favor and no other gospel that will speak true peace to our hearts. This is what Martin Luther discovered. People attempt all manner of ways to gain favor with God and Luther tried practically all of them. He offered good works as a monk, he undertook sacred quests and made special offerings, he sought mystical highs and he abased himself low before the church confessors. But none of these attempts succeeded for Luther, for the simple reason that none had God’s written approval. Therefore Luther turned to the Bible, where he learned the gospel that is, he wrote, “nothing but the story of how Christ stepped into our sins, carried them on the cross in his flesh, and destroyed them, so that all who believe in him are set free from sin through him.”<sup>6</sup> This is what the apostles taught. Paul wrote that “In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (Eph. 1:7). John taught, “the blood of Jesus [God’s] Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7). Peter says, “you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). The message of Samuel’s sacrifice, and the message of all the Bible is twofold: *no sinner* may come before God’s holiness without atoning blood, but also that *any sinner* may come through the precious blood of Christ.

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, *Concerning the Letter and the Spirit*, in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 84.

Samuel's lamb was a picture of Christ as our sacrifice, but Samuel himself was a picture of Christ as our priest. "Samuel cried out to the LORD" (1 Sam. 7:9), so that the people would be accepted. Like Israel, we are reconciled to God through the mediating ministry of one sent by God – one who is both God and man, the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews, reminds us that the risen Lord Jesus lives and reigns forever, and thus that "he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). Ralph Davis comments: "In Samuel's intercession on Israel's behalf... we see a picture of the office of Christ as our high priest... Here is the true secret of our steadfastness: we rely on the prayers of Another whose prayers are always effectual. Nothing is quite so moving as knowing that I am a subject of Jesus' intercessory prayer."<sup>7</sup>

Christian faith is always lived out in a dangerous world that is hostile to true faith. So it was that when the Philistines learned of the assembly at Mizpah they were very unhappy: "Now when the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel" (1 Sam. 7:7). The Philistines would have thought – accurately – that a spiritual renewal of Israel would threaten their overlordship. Militarily superior, the Philistines confidently advanced upon Mizpah, eager to snuff out this Israelite resurgence.

"When the people of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines" (1 Sam. 7:7). Here, is what seemed to be a replaying of the earlier disaster. At the first battle of Ebenezer, the Philistines had appeared in their might. On that occasion, Israel's leaders arrogantly sought to employ God's power through the Ark. But here, instead, they appealed to Samuel: "Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us, that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines" (1 Sam. 7:8). In the contrast between this scenario and the earlier battle, we see the difference between true and false religion. Earlier, summoning the Ark, they hoped "that *it* may come among us and save us" (1 Sam. 4:3). Now they ask Samuel to pray to God "that *he* may save us" (1 Sam. 7:8). False religion is always an impersonal,

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<sup>7</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *I Samuel: Looking on the Heart*, 60.



impious attempt to manipulate God's power for our own purpose. True religion is a personal relationship with the holy God, who reconciles us through the mediator he has sent, cleanses us by the sacrifice he provides, and saves us by his mighty grace.

So it was that "As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel. But the Lord thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion, and they were routed before Israel" (1 Sam. 7:10). What a difference true religion makes! When God's people humbly come to God through the atoning blood and look to him in faith, God shows his power to save. Invigorated by God's mighty intervention, the Israelites sprang forward in new power: "The men of Israel went out from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them, as far as below Beth-car" (1 Sam. 7:11). What a difference this was from the weakness and despair of Israel at the beginning of the chapter. The difference was made when Israel returned to the Lord, confessed their sins, and appealed to God's grace in Christ with a sincere faith.

#### RAISING EBENEZER

Scholars debate what really happened at Mizpah, offering all manner of creative explanations to avoid the plain statement of the biblical text. Samuel's simple explanation was offered in the form of a memorial stone he set in place on the site. He "called its name Ebenezer; for he said, 'Till now the Lord has helped us'" (1 Sam. 7:12). That is what happened at Mizpah: God helped his people by saving them from their enemies, just as he protects and preserves the souls of everyone who calls on his name in faith.

By erecting a memorial stone, Samuel was following in the footsteps of prior believers, especially Joshua. When God opened a way through the Jordan River for Israel to pass through, Joshua built a pile of stones to mark the event (Jos. 4:20-24). At the end of Joshua's life, when Israel gathered to renew the covenant at Shechem, Joshua set up a stone as a testimony (Jos. 24:26). Gordon Keddie writes, "The idea of these memorials was that they be a standing witness to

what God had done in the past for his people, and to what he would yet do in time to come.”<sup>8</sup>

The curious feature on this occasion was the name Samuel gave to the memorial stone: Ebenezer. Ebenezer was the location of Israel’s defeat twenty years earlier, many miles to the northwest. On that occasion the name of the place mocked Israel’s failure: Ebenezer means “God has helped,” yet God refused to help Israel because of unbelief. Now, acting in faith, Israel had experienced God’s help, and Samuel seems to want to make this point clear. Robert Bergen writes, “All that was lost through sin in the first Ebenezer event was restored through repentance in the second.”<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, Samuel specifies, “Till now the Lord has helped us” (1 Sam. 7:12). By this, he reminds Israel that this recent victory is just the latest in a long history of God’s mighty redemptive acts. It is because of a long chain of mercies that Israel exists in blessing. Samuel aims for the people to remember what God has done “till now,” so that in the future they will appeal to him in faith again.

This argues that Christians should make memorials of God’s grace in their own lives. There will be times when we turned to the Lord sincerely and he gave us his peace, he met our need, and he strengthened our faith to endure a trial. Kenneth Chafin writes, “Often an individual can work out of a time of discouragement simply by stopping to remember all the blessings God has brought into his or her life.”<sup>10</sup> In the future, we may find ourselves on dark paths, we may think ourselves pushed to the limit of our endurance and tempted to despair. What we need then is to remember that “till now the Lord has helped us.” God has been there for us in the past, so we are encouraged to trust him for today and tomorrow. The hymn, drawn from this passage, says, “Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by thy help I’m come / And I hope, by thy good pleasure; safely to arrive at home.” Christians do not live *in* the past, but we do live *out of* the past: we remember how God has proved his faithfulness and love, and thus we hope anew to arrive safely at home.

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<sup>8</sup> Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of 1 Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 88.

<sup>9</sup> Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 108.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth L. Chafin, *1 & 2 Samuel*, The Preacher’s Commentary, vol. 8 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 66.

Of course, the great event to which we look in gratitude, memorialized by the Ebenezer stone of the Lord's Supper, is the cross of Jesus Christ. Looking to the cross, where God gave his own Son to save us from our sins, no Christian can truly doubt God's help. With the cross in view, we say, "O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be / let that grace now, like a fetter, bind my wand'ring heart to thee."<sup>11</sup>

God's defeat of Israel's enemies led to a renewed time of peace: "The Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel. And the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. The cities that the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath, and Israel delivered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. There was peace also between Israel and the Amorites" (1 Sam. 7:13-14). So it is when God's people are strong in the Lord. The history of revivals shows that when the gospel is advancing, vice is subdued in society. Blaikie writes: "Wherever the life and character of a godly man is such as to recall God, wherever God's image is plainly visible, wherever the results of God's presence are plainly seen, there the idea of a supernatural Power is conveyed, and a certain overawing influence is felt."<sup>12</sup>

Samuel's Ebenezer stone was intended to speak to such times, for prosperity and peace had often led Israel into idolatry in the past. The memorial was designed to inspire them to thanksgiving for the victory God had graciously given and to remind them not to forsake God's help by turning away to other gods.

For the rest of his life, Samuel remained as judge over Israel. "And he went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah. And he judged Israel in all these places. Then he would return to Ramah, for his home was there, and there also he judged Israel. And he built there an altar to the LORD" (1 Sam. 7:16-17). By traveling to different regions, Samuel's leadership served to unite the tribes of Israel, and in this way set the stage for the kingship that followed. While these words sum up years of ministry that followed the victory

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Robinson, "Come, Thou Font of Every Blessing," 1758.

<sup>12</sup> Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel*, 102.

at Ebenezer, we can have little doubt regarding the message Samuel continued brought before the people, a message that is as true and urgent today as ever: “If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods... and direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only... for till now the Lord has helped us.” May we never forget that grace, relying on the Lord’s help in all our times of need.