
Repent and Return

1 Samuel 7:3-17⁶

Russ Kennedy

What does trouble do for your relationship with the Lord?

It had been a difficult time for the nation of Israel. They have suffered a devastating defeat at the hands of their mortal enemies, the Philistines. Their Ark of the Covenant had been captured but after a long agonizing time, had been returned. Their priest and his horrible sons have died. The ark remains at Kiriath-jearim under the care of Eleazar in his father, Abinadab, house. And now their new prophet and judge convenes them in a national assembly and confronts them about their sin.

This chapter introduces us to the ministry of Samuel. The man is now the officially recognized leader of Israel as prophet and judge. He is the transition between the age of the judges to the age of the kings.

We have known this person as the boy, Samuel. Now he stands and speaks and all Israel know this is the voice of God to them. For, Samuel is now:

God's Messenger

(v. 3-4)

Samuel speaks for God and calls on them to put away their idols.

³ And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." ⁴ So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and they served the Lord only.

The Idolatry of God's People

As often happened, Israel exchanged the worship of God for the worship of idols. They were so easily drawn away from trusting and obeying God. Their sinful hearts were rarely satisfied with what God gave them. And they almost never thought of God as sufficient for them.

This may have been the reasons for God's allowing their defeat. He was breaking them so that they would be ready to repent and return to the Lord.

⁶ Unless otherwise designated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The Ministry of God's Man

Samuel is doing prophetic ministry. While he had served as an apprentice in the Temple, he is now the standing prophet of God.

And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD. And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD. (1 Samuel 3:19–21)

The Preaching of God's Prophet

Samuel speaks for God.

He confronts the people with their sin. He names their sin as idolatry. He is clear and uncompromising. Israel has once again gone after idols. This is their sin before God.

He calls on them repent. Repentance is going to mean putting the idols away. They cannot come to God with their idols in their pockets, or in their yards, or in their houses. They must put those idols away, first from their hearts and then from their lives.

He locates their sin in their hearts. Genuine repentance is not just outward compliance, but is inward belief and submission. To put away idols in the heart means that:

We acknowledge the God of the Bible as the one and only true God;

We believe what His Word says and commands;

We submit to Him by desiring what He requires.

This is what it means to speak for God. God's messengers will always declare the supremacy and sufficiency of God. They will always call for people to turn from their idols and turn to the Lord.

This is what it means to respond to the preaching of God's Word. It means believing what the Bible says ready to gladly submit to God. It is not just knowing, but a God given faith that produces a simple, sincere, glad hearted obedience.

Make no mistake; we still worship idols. Ours may not be stone or wood. They tend more to be the pursuits and pleasures that rule our hearts. Our idols are sometimes are desiring and worshipping what God has forbidden. But often, Christians have turned good things into idols. Thus they want a good thing so badly they will sin to get it or sin when they don't have it. Thus the good things become terrible masters, functioning as heart idols.

One area many Christians need to repent and return to the Lord is in submitting to God's providences. Many of us struggle with not wanting what God wants. We reject God's planning, purpose or providence and grumble, complain or get depressed because of what God has brought into or withheld from us.

In all of the message to us is clear.

Identify the idols of your life. What rules your behavior and your emotions?

Repent of them by turning away from them and submitting to God.

Put them away from you so that you are pleasing to God.

God's Mediator

(v. 5-11)

Samuel also prays for them that God will protect them from their enemy.

⁵ Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you." ⁶ So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the Lord and fasted on that day and said there, "We have sinned against the Lord." And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah. ⁷ Now when the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines. ⁸ And the people of Israel said 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." ⁹ So 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. ¹⁰ 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 defeated before Israel. ¹¹ And the men of Israel went out from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them, as far as below Beth-car.

Samuel is serving here in his role as a priest. He prays for them and he offers up a sacrifice for them. He is also serving as the last of Israel's judges (v. 6). He stands as the transition between the judges and the kings. He does so as a man of the Word; the one through who God reveals Himself.

The Praying for God's People

Samuel gathers the people at a town seven miles north of Jerusalem. The people gather as called. Samuel leads the people in fasting and confessing of sin.

One commentator from days gone by helpfully says;

The re-establishment of the faith of their fathers was inaugurated at a great public meeting, held at Mizpeh in Judah, and hallowed by the observance of impressive religious solemnities. The drawing of water, and pouring it out before the Lord, seems to have been a symbolical act by which, in the people's name, Samuel testified their sense of national corruption, their need of that moral purification of which water is the emblem, and their sincere desire to pour out their hearts in repentance before God. (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown)

God's people are being restored through their repentance and the mediation of the priest. Samuel is being very clear that this is not merely personal praying for them because of some felt need. This is a public, formal mediation where God's appointed man stands before God and His people and effects their restoration.

The Sacrifice for God's People

God requires sacrifice for sin. Where there is not sacrifice, where sin is not atoned for, there can be no true mediation. Consistent with that principle, Samuel offers a sacrifice. The lamb is a burnt offering and thus is an sin offering. Repentant people have their sins forgiven on the basis of a sacrifice offered. But like the outpouring of water, this sacrifice is an act of faith, trust and obedience. But this lamb could not possibly actually atone for their sin. It pictures the future sacrificial, substitutionary death of Jesus Christ. Thus Samuel and the people of God are looking forward in faith that God will forgive.

The Protection of God's People

This gathering of Israel would have looked like the assembling of an army. The Philistines interpret it that way and prepare to attack. They want to catch Israel before they can be mustered into military array and the families go home. But it is worse than that: this is a religious assembly and not the preparation of an army. So the Israelites are very vulnerable.

This time, they do not try to go out on their own. They do not grab the Ark and take it into the battle like some religious talisman. They turn to God. They turn to God's man. They seek God's protection.

God answers. With a mighty storm of thunder and lightning, God fills the Philistines with dread and fear. They turn and run. The men of Israel go after and soundly defeat the Philistines. This establishes a period of quiet and peace during Samuel's lifetime (v.13).

Samuel points us to Christ. The Lord Jesus is our great high priest. He has offered up the sacrifice for sin. He is both priest and lamb. He therefore intercedes for us. He has provided all we need to be reconciled and restored to God. Now, He stands before God in a slain, but risen and glorified human body and mediates for us. He presents Himself and the Father is satisfied. Through Him, our own prayers are heard. So the Lord moves to protect His own. He will defend us against Satan and sin. In Him we will rest and be safe.

God's Advocate

(v. 12-14)

Samuel brings Israel to trust God is their rock.

¹² 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." ¹³ So 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. ¹⁴ 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.

The setting up of stones to commemorate significant events has been a part of the Hebrew culture since Jacob set up a memorial at Bethel (Gen. 28:20-22; 35:14). Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan (Josh. 4:9) and twelve more on the western bank at Gilgal to mark the place where the waters opened and Israel crossed into the Promised Land (vv. 4:1-8, 19-21). A great heap of stones in the Achor Valley reminded the Jews of Achan's

disobedience (vv. 7:24–26), and another heap marked the burial place of the king of Ai (8:29). Another heap stood at a cave at Makkedah to mark where five kings had been defeated and slain (10:25–27). Before his death, Joshua set up a “witness stone” to remind the Israelites of their vow to serve the Lord alone and obey Him (24:26–28). (Wiersbe p. 44)

Ebenezer as a place of defeat

1 Samuel 4:1–3

And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek. The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle. And when the people came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, “Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.”

This was the old site called Ebenezer where the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines. There Israel relied on the Ark as a talisman rather than relying on the Lord as their God.

Ebenezer as a place of remembrance

So, Samuel sets up this great stone. It is there as a memorial, a reminder. They are to remember what God has done for them in the past. But they are to rely and trust in God for the future.

Ebenezer as proclaiming God’s name

This great stone also should preach to them. This phrase, “the Lord has helped us” has in its core, a name of God. Yahweh-Azara. God is our helper. He has helped us in the past. He will help us in the future.

Ebenezer as a lasting testimony

So God’s people have the Lord to be a rock. He is a steadfast and unchanging God. In the constant shifting of human history, God’s eternal purposes are be carried out. David often comes back to this idea of God as a rock, a helper.

God's Judge

(v. 15-17)

Samuel is faithful to serve God and God's people well.

¹⁵ Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. ¹⁶ And he went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah. And he judged Israel in all these places. ¹⁷ 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.

Faithful in his Ministry

Samuel is highlighted as a faithful judge. This means that he was their political leader. In the absence of a king, he sat with the people and administered the Mosaic Law which governed them. He served his whole life. And he served by working hard and traveling much. He went to the people and led them and dealt with them.

Regular to his Home

He went home. Often. Regularly. He used it as a base for the leadership he provided. Samuel was an unusual judge. He was a man of God who sought to please God in his ministry and in his home. As we will see, his sons did not follow his guidance nor walk in the Lord's ways. The Bible tells us that Eli was a poor father. It seems to me that the implication here is that Samuel was a good father.

Builds an Altar

Finally Samuel leads the worship of Israel. The Ark is not at Shiloh or Ramah. It is safely being guarded in Kiriath-jearim. But Samuel leads Israel to sacrifice to the Lord. So, he is portrayed as providing a faithful prophetic, political and priestly ministry.

Reflect and Respond

Consider the Lord Jesus who is faithful in His ministry for His people.

He is our faithful prophet who reveals God to us and calls us to walk with Him His will and His wisdom.

He is our faithful mediator who has offered up Himself for our sins that we might be redeemed, reconciled and restored to Him.

He is our faithful high priest who hears our prayers, knows personally our problems and is our help in time of need.

So in the call to consider Jesus and to worship Him is a call to turn from your idols. Oh, I know, most of you do not have a statute somewhere that you secretly bow to or sacrifice to. But most of us have heart idols. These things are defined as trusts and treasures in our heart. It may be a material thing like a car, a computer, a home. It may be a status or a station in life like being married, have a certain kind of spouse, having position or power in the church or at work. It may be even a good thing like desiring the salvation of our children or a family

member or a much loved friend. But if we will sin to get these things, or sin when we don't have them, they are functional idols. They have become bad masters that we serve and sacrifice to. They drive emotions of fear, worry, anger, frustration. Brothers and sisters, to repent and to return means to turn away from these as well. It means to place them under the Lordship of Christ. It means to entrust them to Christ and to wait on His timing.

You who serve Christ should be faithful in the place that God puts you. We observe this from Samuel. We see it all through the Bible. But most importantly, we see in Jesus. He is faithful in all that He is and does. Our own work for Him pleases Him and makes Him glad.

Is Christ your Ebenezer?

To be grateful for how He has helped you in the past...

To understand how He is helping you in the present...

To trust that He will be your Rock through the rest of your life and in the life to come.

