

# 1 SAMUEL 7 - RAISING EBENEZER?

## Study 8

### NEW MERCIES

Have you missed him? Or have you been so caught up in the story that you haven't thought about him? Now, he returns, Samuel takes the stage to lead the people before God.

Samuel's last appearance in chapter 3 was a sign of fresh grace to Israel. His appearance again coincides with new mercies.

This time, Samuel acts as prophet and intercessor in order to restore Israel to their God.

The Ark had now returned to Israel, but was resting at an obscure border town. There were some signs of spiritual health during the 20 year period that the Ark was kept at Kiriath-jearim: "all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD" (7:2).

What was Samuel doing for these 20 long years? Perhaps he was faithfully travelling around Israel preaching the need for repentance. If so, chapter 7 provides the response to Samuel's preaching. The nation was ready to return to God! While external remorse, tears and sorrow, was a good sign, true repentance meant something more substantial. Genuine repentance would lead to action, putting away the foreign Gods. True repentance would meet God's demand for exclusive allegiance.

This was a difficult repentance for the Israelites. The Baals and Ashteroth were popular gods of the Canaanites, this was the cultural norm. Israel would have to go against the cultural flow! Furthermore, these gods appealed to many of the natural desires. Ralph Davies writes:

Canaanite religion exerted a powerful appeal with the sexual rites that were part of its worship. Most fun-loving Canaanites doubtless found the combination of liturgy and orgy highly congenial, not to speak of the convenience of having chapel and brothel at one location.<sup>1</sup>

It was a religion that appealed to the desires of many people. Only a miraculous work of God would be sufficient to peel the Israelites away from their idols. This repentance needed to involve more than just tears, it required Israel to throw down her idols. The Hymn writer William Cowper writes his song "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.

### READ 1 Samuel 7:1-6

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, D. R. (2000). 1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart (p. 73). Scotland: Christian Focus Publications.

## QUESTIONS

1. What features of this passage stand out to you?
2. If repentance must move to concrete action, can the same be said also of faith (James 2:17)?

## THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S MERCY

The Philistines heard (v. 7)! But the enemies of God usually feel threatened by true religion. For them, Mizpah meant that the Israelites would trust in God and no longer live under the oppression of the Philistines. As opposed to chapter 4, where Israel proudly brought the Ark to bring victory, now they can only ask Samuel to cry out on their behalf (v. 8). There is no longer any pride, only desperation.

They are no longer dabbling in religious magic. Their only weapon is prayer. However, desperation is never pointless when it's trust is in the infinite God. Hannah had already learnt this lesson decades earlier.

There is an important lesson here. Israel was at the end of her resources and prayer was her only course of action. However, it's possible that much of christianity hasn't reached this point of desperation, as we develop new strategies or gimmicks and promote programs, perhaps thinking that we are clever enough to bring about spiritual change. Are we really relying on God? Is this true for our personal life as well? Are we desperate for God, knowing that he is our only hope.

We should also note that, in Samuel's intercession on Israel's behalf, we see a picture of Christ in the office of our high priest. The true hope of the Christian is not simply our own prayer, but that Christ intercedes for us on our behalf, and his prayers are always effective (Heb. 7:25).

## READ - 1 SAMUEL 7:7-10

## QUESTIONS

1. What features of this passage stand out to you?

2. Is the idea that repentance is supernatural new to you? But how else could it be real, given that you and I are sinners? (Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25)
3. How central is prayer in your whole approach to life with God?

## THE MEMORY OF GOD'S MERCY

God brought victory for the Israelites. Samuel now sets up a monument, and calls it Ebenezer (the stone of help), the significance is that “Up to this point Yahweh has helped us.” There is a whole history of mercies that Israel needed to remember. He also expects this past help to provide the Israelites with the confidence that God will continue to help his people. But was God helping Israel even in times of discipline, such as when the Ark was captured? William Blaikie writes

Even amid the desolations of Shiloh the Lord was helping them. He was helping them to know themselves, helping them to know their sins, and helping them to know the bitter fruit and wo[e]ful punishment of sin.... The links of the long chain denoted by Samuel's “hitherto” were not all of one kind. Some were in the form of mercies, many were in the form of chastenings.

God's help can be found even in the apparent darkness. Therefore, the Ebenezer monument seeks to cement Israel's memory to the past and most current mercies of God. For the Christian, it is memory that keeps our faith filled with thanksgiving... memory of the great works of God. At times, the memory of God is all we have to sustain us. You may be tempted to despair, pushed to the limit, unable to see the light of God's presence. In these moments, we need to raise our Ebenezer, and remember God's mercies to us.

### READ - 1 SAMUEL 7:11-14

#### QUESTIONS

1. What features of this passage stand out to you?
2. The story of Ebenezer is a helpful reminder of the value of recalling God's past deeds of grace for us. Can you share a story of God's grace to you?

## ORDINARY MERCIES

As much as we'd like to have a Mizpah moment, that of nation-wide repentance. Much of our experience is lived in verses 15-17. After this mountain top experience of revival, Samuel commences routine duties of visiting to provide spiritual guidance. The circuit through Benjamin is never as glamorous as revival at Mizpah, but it is the road for many of us.

### READ - 1 SAMUEL 7:15-16

#### QUESTIONS

1. What features of this passage stand out to you?
2. How does this chapter point to Christ?