

The Weight of the Crown

An Ebenezer Moment

1 Samuel 7:3-17

Mark Vroegop

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 Ashtaroath 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." So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroath, and they served the LORD only. Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you." 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. 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. 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." 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. 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. And the men of Israel went out from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them, as far as below Beth-car. 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." 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. 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. Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. 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. 7:3-17).

I wonder if you remember a really special day in elementary school or perhaps in Sunday school. It was called "show and tell." A core memory of mine is the excitement of knowing that your name was next on the list, and you could dream of what you would bring to class for "show and tell."

Some of my classmates brought things they made or a family heirloom. Others brought their pet—bunnies, hermit crabs, dogs. The student would bring their special "thing" (that's the show). Then they would "tell" the class about it. It was the best!

In the spirit of "show and tell," I brought a few things that are on my office book shelves:

- A pinecone from the tree under which I received Jesus as my savior at a camp in Northern Michigan
- A newspaper on the morning when our twins were born
- A vial with dirt from the ground-breaking of our new sanctuary
- A stone from the valley of Elah where David killed Goliath
- A large pebble of salt from the Dead Sea

I'm a bit of a sentimental collector. So, this is just a sampling of the things that I keep. Each of them have a story and meaning behind them. The salt pebble reminds me of an early morning run by the Dead Sea while I was on sabbatical. I stopped by the sea and met with the Lord in a profound way as I cast some "cares" on him, determining that there were some things I was leaving in the Dead Sea.

I picked up the pinecone when I was speaking at a men's retreat at Lake Ann Camp. Thirty years had passed since that moment when I knew God was calling me to himself. As I walked around the campground, I thought about God's faithfulness and kindness to me. The big pine tree was still standing and returning to the location moved me to tears.

You probably have similar stories, and perhaps you have some personal memorabilia as well. In 1 Samuel, there's a name for a monument that brings to mind the faithfulness of God: Ebenezer. It's a place where God's people celebrate that "till now the Lord has helped us."

Today is our fifth message in the book of 1 Samuel. So far, we've looked at:

- The gray-zone moment of the transition between the time of the judges to the time of kings
- Hannah's prayer, the provision of Samuel, and gifting him to the Lord
- The corruption of worship and the calling of Samuel
- The tragedy of treating a worthy God as if he's just useful

We've bounced back and forth from encouraging stories and disturbing one. A gray zone is always bumpy. It's a time where you feel a lot of emotions. There's a lot to celebrate, and there's a lot to mourn.

Our text today is a moment of celebration. It's a scene where God's people will be called to **remember for the purpose of renewal**. The groaning, "Israel lamented after the Lord," turns to a moment of spiritual renewal. It's beautiful, instructive, and (honestly) rare. This is a bright spot in 1 & 2 Samuel.

Conditions of Renewal (vv. 3-4)

1 Samuel 7:3-4 identify several conditions for renewal. Samuel will call the people of God to action—to step out of their spiritual lethargy. Last week's sermon ended, not only with a dark note about lamenting after the Lord, but also with a time stamp of twenty years.

That's important to remember because when we read this account immediately following the tragedy of the previous chapters, you can get the impression that things changed quickly or resolve in a timely

fashion. But that's not normally the case. Progress or change of any kind is normally slow. This text helps us embrace what Eugene Peterson calls a long obedience in the same direction.

It seems safe to assume that Samuel is serving faithfully during these twenty years, and then the timing is right for a movement of renewal.

Verse 3 highlights a statement from Samuel: "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart . . ." The word "return" here relates to the concept of repentance which means a turning away from sin and a turning to God. The word was often used in passages describing the people of God renewing their relationship with God by turning back to him.

It appears (v. 3b) that the people are seeing a looming threat of the Philistines, and God is using it to get their attention. Maybe they remembered what happened the last time. Maybe twenty years is a marker for a new generation. But he lays out the opportunity for renewal by identifying the conditions or characteristics. There are two:

1) Put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth

As so often happened in Israel's history, they adopted the gods of the non-Israelites around them. Now in our modern ears, this seems like a rather distant command. But you need to know something about these gods, especially Ashtaroth.

These were more than just gods. This is the way that the entire Canaanite culture thought about the world in which they lived. They believed that Baal was the god of thunder and rain. They believed that Ashtaroth was the goddess of fertility. Baal and Ashtaroth make rain, crops to grow, and cattle to reproduce. This is how the world worked.

What's more, the worship of Baal and Ashtaroth was a graphic and immoral activity. Since it was believed that Baal and Ashtaroth engaged in sexual activity for the purpose of earthly fertility, the worship of Baal and Ashtaroth involved the same. This religion was popular and devastating to the Israelite people. In their dark moments, they tried to keep their feet both in God's camp and in the Canaanite camp. Samuel invites them to turn from their foreign gods.

Aren't you glad that we don't have anything that involves worship and immorality in our day? Of course we do! Make no mistake about it. The enemy's strategy has not changed. And behind immorality are idols—what we worship. It's not just that a person is sleeping around, cheating on their spouse, or looking at porn. Those are all connected in some way to worship, especially the worship of self. And as the worship of self has taken hold, it's no wonder that the pattern of immorality has gotten worse.

Sexuality isn't the only issue. You can make an idol out of anything. Success, appearance, money, prestige, power, and influence are a part of the mix. The thing about idols is that we use them to give us what we want, but they end up using us. The seeds of renewal are planted when God's people turn away from cultural idols and all the behaviors that go along with them.

2) Direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only

Turning from idols is not the only step. Samuel also exhorts the people toward a reorientation of their heart and life, along with a dedicated commitment to take actions that fit with that directional shift.

It's interesting that the Hebrew word for "direct" can mean to prepare and to make ready. But it can also mean to set or raise something up. Maybe you could think of it as drawing a line in the sand or planting a flag. Or maybe setting up an Ebenezer as we'll see later in the text. The idea is a determination. I'm done with that way of living, and I'm embracing a different path. That's the sense.

These conditions lead to a promise. If the people turn back to God, he will provide what they need. In this specific case, it's deliverance from the Philistines. The people's response was to embrace this prophetic calling and invitation: "they put away their Baals and Ashtaroath, and they served the Lord only" (v. 4)

A turning or repentance also involves a decision to singularly follow the Lord. It means knowing where you are not headed, deciding that you are going to move in a godly direction, and willfully choosing the path of righteousness. Dale Ralph Davis says, "genuine repentance will always move beyond wet eyes and moved feelings and stirred emotions; it will cast down idols and cling to the only God."¹

I wonder if there are idols that you need to put down? Perhaps there's something controlling your life, something creating a barrier between you and the Lord. Maybe today could be a day of renewal, a day when you turn back to God.

Fruit of Renewal (vv. 5-11)

The invitation turns to action as Samuel gathers the people together for a spiritual renewal service. He invited them to the city of Mizpah, about five miles north of Jerusalem. It was a city that Samuel traveled through frequently, and it was a historic rallying point for Israel (see Judges 20:1).²

As they people gather, they poured out water, fasted, and confessed that they have sinned against the Lord. Samuel instructed the people in the path of righteousness and obedience. That's what it means that "he judged them." It's a statement regarding renewal. Samuel is telling people what is right.

When the Philistines hear about this national gathering, they seem to assume that it's preparation for battle. They rally their troops and make their way toward Israel for battle. The Israelites are afraid. This should bring to mind the text last week where the people asked for the ark to be brought. But this time, they make the right choice. They appeal to Samuel to cry out to God on their behalf. This is a bright moment where the people of God respond in a good and godly manner: "Do not cease to cry out to the

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, [*1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart*](#), Focus on the Bible Commentary (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 74.

² Joyce G. Baldwin, [*1 and 2 Samuel: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 8, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 85.

LORD our God for us, that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines” (v. 8). The most important phrase is “that he may save us.”

Samuel represents the people and offers a sacrifice (v. 9). It’s fascinating that the text says that as Samuel made the offering “the Lord answered him.” This may point back to Hannah’s prayer earlier and even Samuel’s response to the Lord calling his name. Further remember that the word of the Lord was rare during these days (3:1). This is a significant change in the spiritual situation in Israel. After years of spiritual lethargy and while the ark of the covenant is still in storage, this is a bright spot.

In verse 10, we learn that the Philistines marshalled an attack during the offering, but God intervened. The text says, “the Lord thundered with a mighty sound that day . . .” It’s remarkable to see the connection between this moment and what Hannah prayed in 1 Samuel 2:10: “The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven.” Israel was able to win a great victory, reversing the narrative of what happened when the ark was captured. In that moment Israel was defeated before the Philistines. Now the Philistines are defeated before the Israelites.

It was a day of great victory, a reversal of what had happened twenty years earlier. The difference was the posture of God’s people. Instead of using God to get what they wanted, the people embraced the opportunity for spiritual renewal and God delivered them. This is the way that God works.

In offering salvation, God is willing to forgive our sins. But we needed a sacrifice that we could not provide, and we need a cleansing that we cannot achieve. The beauty of God’s grace is the offering of Christ as our atonement and receiving the forgiveness that we could never earn on our own. Salvation comes to those who’ve come to an end of themselves, who look to Christ for deliverance and help.

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12-13).

But this posture doesn’t stop there. It’s not as though we rely on God’s mercy at the beginning and then we take over for the rest of our lives. The Christian life is a daily exercise in embracing our continual and desperate need of God’s help.

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:14-16).

We’re called to remember the record of God in the Bible and in our lives so that we keep coming to him for the help and renewal that we desperately need.

Legacy of Renewal (vv. 12-17)

Our text concludes with the raising of a monument called an Ebenezer stone. According to verse 12, this stone was set up near Mizpah where their renewal took place. What's more, we're told what the name Ebenezer signifies: "Till now the Lord has helped us." The stone was meant to be a physical reminder about their experience and what God did for them. Monuments like this are important because we are inclined to forget so quickly. The lessons of the past can be neglected, and it is spiritually helpful to consider all the ways that the Lord has worked. Our weak faith needs these reminders.

The decisive victory of the Lord ushered in a new season in Israel. According to verses 13-14, Israel experienced restoration and peace. What's more, Samuel's ministry continued. He traveled on a circuit throughout the land, providing spiritual leadership and direction to the nation. And he built an altar to the Lord in Ramah. Samuel led a time of spiritual renewal in Israel, and the Ebenezer stone memorialized the moment.

Remember for Renewal

I wonder what real or figurative Ebenezers you have in your life? Perhaps God is in the middle of creating an Ebenezer moment for you right now, maybe even today. It could also be that it's good for your soul to remember that God has helped you.

Here I raise my Ebenezer;
Hither by Thy help I'm come;
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.

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