

1 Samuel 7

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[0 : 00] Let's just turn briefly this evening to the second of our readings, which was 1 Samuel chapter 7, and we'll read again at verse 12 where Samuel took a stone after God thundered against the Philistines, striking panic into their being, and with the result that they were defeated before Israel.

Samuel then took a stone, a big stone, and he set it up between Mizpah and Shen, and he named it Ebenezer, saying, thus far the Lord has helped us.

In the last two years, of course, the issue of statues has been a controversial one.

Which statues do we want to see in our towns and cities, and why do we want to see them? The statues are monuments that look back in history and in time to the achievements and to the contribution that certain people have made.

So, for example, in Edinburgh, you'll have a statue to, for example, Thomas Chalmers. And I'm not just saying that because this is a free church, but Thomas Chalmers was known throughout Scotland, not only for his preaching, but for the novel way in which he gave relief to desperately poor people.

[1 : 46] So, he is remembered for good reason. And you'll also have statues to people like David Hume, the philosopher David Hume in the Enlightenment.

And his statue is a much more controversial one. And that was all tied up with the issue of slavery, of course, which was much more common in those days.

But in any case, statues are something that most of our towns and cities have for various reasons. Well, in the days of Israel, if you wanted to remember something, then you set up a stone and you gave it a name so that when future generations would ask, just like they ask today, who was Thomas Chalmers or who was David Hume or who was John Knox?

In those days, children would ask that, why is this stone set up? And the parents would tell them, well, this is the place where a battle took place and where the victory was won by whatever.

And such was the case in chapter 7. This was a momentous occasion, one which deserved a stone being erected and given the name Ebenezer.

[3 : 11] Because Samuel was determined that in the years to come, Israel must remember what happened there. And part of the memorial was found in the name Ebenezer.

The name means the stone of help. And the name Ebenezer is very much tied up with what Samuel, the statement that Samuel makes here, thus far the Lord has helped us.

In other words, he wants them all to remember this as the occasion when they have returned to God and God has returned to them and has won the battle for them as their covenant God.

You remember that this was a very dark time in the history of Israel. They had just come through the period of the judges where every man, we're told, did what was right in his own eyes.

Anybody who's familiar with the book of Judges knows that there's this roller coaster of history where on one generation, they're serving the Lord, they're worshipping the Lord. The next generation, they have wandered away from him, they're worshipping idols.

[4 : 23] And as a result of that, God has allowed their enemies to come in and defeat them. Then they cry to God again in their weakness and they return to him. And then he defeats their enemies.

And there's this roller coaster of defeat and victory. And it never seems to get anywhere because at the end of the book, the book ends horrendously with this incredible slaughter of the people of Israel.

It's not some enemy that slaughtered them. They've actually been in a civil war and thousands upon thousands of them have killed each other. So it comes as a very dark time when it appeared that God wasn't doing much to help his people.

And then he raised up a prophet. We'll come on to him in a few moments time. And his name was Samuel. You know the story of how God raised him. He gave him an answer to prayer to his mother, Hannah, who prayed for a child.

And Samuel was one of the greatest leaders in the Old Testament book and the Old Testament pages. But of course, you remember what happened in chapter 4.

[5 : 36] There was this horrendous battle where the Philistines fought with Israel. And because Israel were superstitious instead of faithfully following God, instead of returning to God in faith, they thought that all they had to do was to call for the Ark of the Covenant.

Because they viewed the Ark of the Covenant as some kind of charm, some kind of symbol that God would honor. And as long as they had this in the battle, then surely God would help them. And that's not what happened. Because despite bringing out the Ark of the Covenant, the Israelites were defeated. And this all happened at a place called Ebenezer.

So there's a double meaning to the name Ebenezer. It doesn't just mean the Lord is our help. It is also the place where Israel was terribly defeated in battle.

Not only were 30,000 of their men killed by the Philistines, but the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord was stolen by the enemy forces.

[6 : 53] And all seemed lost. The Israelites couldn't understand why God hadn't helped them, hadn't given them the victory on that occasion.

Well, they should have looked to themselves. They should have examined their own lives. And then they would have found that their lives were anything but what they should have been. And instead of returning to God, they chose to put their faith in an object, a religious object, rather than God himself.

Now, 20 years has passed. And in those 20 years, a lot has happened. In fact, chapter 7 tells us that the people of Israel began to seek the Lord again.

This is one of the most important statements in this chapter because it tells, because it reminds us that even when it appears that nothing is happening, God is working.

That was true way back in the time of the judges. Is it just because things appear to be pretty bleak? Did not mean that God was working. His purpose all along was to raise up Samuel and for him to be a leader.

[8 : 16] Well, the same was happening again. 20 years it took for Israel to be restored to a right relationship with God again. Now, that didn't happen overnight.

And neither did it happen without God using. Samuel was going about from town to village, from street to street, and maybe even house to house.

His job was to take God's Word to the people of Israel and to preach God's Word. And as he did so, as he did so, chapter 7 tells us, the people began to seek the Lord once again.

Now, let's stop there for a moment and let's apply that to where we are today. 20 years, and it appears that nothing has happened, and yet God is working all the time.

The first thing it reminds me of is that I can be very impatient for God to work. And I can sometimes conclude that God has forsaken us or turned his back on us, and God is no longer with us simply because I can't see much evidence of him working amongst us.

[9 : 39] Do you ever feel like that? And that's part of belonging to a church, isn't it? That you expect, as we come to worship God from Sunday to Sunday, we believe in his reality and his power.

We believe that because of what he's done in our own lives. He's transformed us. He's brought us to repentance and faith, hasn't he? And we hope and we pray that God will work in the lives of others and bring people to hear the gospel.

And when it appears that that doesn't happen or it doesn't happen very evidently, we conclude, well, well, maybe he's no longer with us and maybe he's not going to work.

Maybe he's working in some other part of the world. We hear of other places in the world where things are happening and people are coming to faith in great numbers. And we lose heart. And we lose heart in the preaching and the ministry of the word.

I hope that tonight is a reminder to us, if nothing else, not to lose heart. That God is often a slow worker.

[10 : 54] He'll do things in his own time and we have no right to conclude what God is doing. We don't know what God is doing. Just because society, I hear lots of Christians talking about the way

that society is, as if society is some kind of impregnable force, some kind of indefeatable force and that everything is against us and that we're doomed and that we're going to fizzle out.

Who told you that? How have you come to that conclusion? What if God is going to do something great in the next 10, 20, 30 years? We don't know what God is going to do.

But one thing I know is we have no right to give up hope and to wander away from Him just simply because it doesn't look as if.

Samuel is faithfully ministering God's word for 20 years and I'm sure that he must have wondered what the fruit, what the consequence of that ministry was.

I'm sure he must have come to the end of that 20 years and thought, well, what's it all about? What has God done? Where has all this ministry gone? Where has all my faithfulness, where has it got me?

[12:16] Where has it got Israel? Well, but nonetheless, here is the proof after 20 years. Now, I'm not saying this for no reason because we're standing, Bon Accord is standing on the threshold of a new chapter in the ministry in this congregation.

And it's exciting. I hope that you are excited about it. But excitement, of course, is not enough. You have to be prayerful and you have to be vigilant and we have to be patient because God might not do things when we want him to.

He might take a long time. We might be in for the long haul. Please don't expect that people will be queuing all the way down Rosemount when a new minister comes.

God often, he does things in his own time and his time is much longer than what we expect. But that must not, we mustn't stop praying.

We must be on our knees every day asking that people will be reached and seeking to reach people for the gospel and asking that we will remain faithful to him.

[13:35] Don't conclude that God isn't working. It's a great, one of the great benefits of studying history is that you see this all the time.

For example, one of the classes I teach at ETS is about the Reformation in Scotland and it's such an interesting class. It's such an interesting subject to teach and everybody thinks, you know, that, oh, John Knox was the key to the Reformation in Scotland and John Knox was the great hero.

I have no doubt whatsoever but that he was. But did you know that lots were happening, lots were happening before John Knox came on the scene?

God was working. In fact, if you read John Knox's history of the Reformation, he tells you that. He says that the gospel was being spread long before he came on the scene and it didn't appear that way.

All the appearance was that the darkness and the corruption and the violence of the pre-Reformation church. All the odds seemed to be against those who believed in the gospel.

[14:49] But there were men and women who truly loved and believed in Jesus. They met together, often in secret, to read the Bible and to study the Bible together.

God was working and yet the appearance was the opposite. There was one time, of course, the Bible was forbidden in those days. Only the church was allowed to read the Bible.

Only those who were experts and it was only in Latin, it was only found in Latin. Of course, when the Reformation happened in Europe, one of the first things that happened was the Bible was translated into the common language of the people because the Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin, they believed that you have to put the Bible in the hands of people because it speaks for itself.

Okay? So they did that and the Bible was translated, of course, into English and it was like a black market book. It was being smuggled into Scotland by traders and shipping companies that were coming into Leith and there was the official cargo and then there was the black market cargo and the black market cargo was Bibles.

Can you imagine that? Because it was forbidden by Mary, Queen of Scots, his mother, Mary of Guise. She was a strong Roman Catholic and did not believe that the Bible should be put.

[16:18] But somehow, under the influence of her advisors, she changed her mind. And she suddenly allowed the Bible to be freely available.

And so, from being a forbidden black market book, it was freely available, but of course, it was only to those who could read it, so it became a sort of a fashion accessory to have the Bible in your living room, on your coffee table, in English.

It was something that you were actually proud of. You know, you called your guests into your house for a dinner party and there was a big Bible in English on your coffee table that you showed off. In fact, John Knox wasn't very happy about that aspect of it, that the Bible was being kind of paraded as a kind of a...

But it was there and God was using it because wherever God's Word is, God will use it. What I'm trying to say is that even in the darkest times, you can never say that God is not working.

So let's keep faithful to Him and let's maintain, maintain our obedience to the gospel.

[17 : 36] And in due time when He chooses, just like He did there, then things will come to light. At that time, men and women began to seek the Lord.

And when they did so, and when it became apparent that this was happening, Samuel gathered all the people at this place called Mizpah and he spoke to them and he preached to them everything that was required because as well as being a place where God was going to help His people, it was also a place of repentance.

repentance. And I want us to just think in the last 10 minutes or so that remain this evening of how that repentance becomes obvious in the actions of the people and how that applies in New Testament context.

And I want to suggest to you this evening that this may be, and I hope is an opportunity for us to be restored to God.

There's a sense in which every day ought to be a day of restoration and repentance. And I want us to see how this chapter helps us to understand what repentance is in very vivid detail.

[19 : 07] So let's look at the first thing. first of all, repentance means putting sinful things away. Then all the people of Israel turned back to the Lord.

Verse 3, So 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.

Now that tells me that true repentance is different from just remorse. A lot of people think that repentance is just being sorry for sin.

Well, that's part of it. But there's much more to it than that. Repentance is a deliberate decision to put away what is offensive to God.

And I would like this to be an opportunity right now for us to think in our hearts, is there anything in my life, is there anything in my heart, is there anything in my habit, is there anything about my personality that is offensive to God?

[20 : 26] God. That's where it begins. And you know what? It's not enough for us to ask ourselves that.

We have to ask God to help us to find the offense. We have to ask God. Remember when in Psalm 130 where David says, Lord, you have searched me and you have known me.

And then he says at the very end of that psalm, he says, search me, O God, and see if there is any wicked way within me.

You see, we can't even find our own badness by ourselves. We need God to show us our badness. And I would like us to ask God honestly in the secret of our hearts right now to show us our badness.

And then the psalmist says, and lead me in the way of everlasting. So that's where it begins by putting away sinful things, whatever that is.

[21 : 38] Now it's up to you to decide what these are. You have to search your own conscience in the light of the Bible and how the Bible informs our conscience as to what is spoiling our fellowship with God and what is ruining our Christian witness and our relationship with Him.

So repentance means turning. That's what Samuel said. He said, if you're returning to the Lord, then rid yourselves of all the foreign gods. Everything that was offensive to God.

Let's make this an opportunity to do the same. And then in verse 6, here's another sign. When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord.

Now that was a symbol, a symbolic action. And it simply meant that they were coming with all their heart and they were literally pouring out their heart to the Lord.

They were coming to the Lord 100%, not 50%, not 20%, not 90%, but they were coming 100% back to God.

[22 : 55] And they did this, they took a jar or a, I don't know what it would have been, a stone jar, I guess, of water, and they would publicly pour it out before.

It was a very vivid symbol of that passionate outpouring of grief as well as love for God.

God. And again, I'm asking the question this evening, is our worship 100%? Are we coming to God tonight? And when we sing the Psalms and the hymns, when we read the chapter, are we here 100%?

Are we devoting ourselves to Him? And then again in verse 6, they'd assembled, they drew water, and they prayed. Because repentance is not just a mechanical exercise, it is a personal commitment to God that can only be made by you and Him.

I can't do it for you. I'm not a priest. I can't stand on your behalf in front of God. We all need to stand on our own, on our own behalf.

[24 : 13] And we need to confess our own sin, and we need to do so 100%. But then the last thing that I notice in this passage is that they sacrificed.

You remember in 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.

And I want to end with this, that there is no way that we can repent by ourselves in our own strength. We cannot generate our own repentance. It has to be through a mediator.

Samuel is a really fascinating character. He's one of the greatest men that walked the face of the earth, and that we find in the pages of the Old Testament.

He was raised up a particular time in Israel's history, and he was a great leader. He was three things. He fulfilled three functions in Israel.

[25 : 20] First of all, he was a prophet, which meant that his job was to bring the message of God to the people of Israel. The word was his business, and so he went from towns to cities to streets, and he made the message of God known to the people.

But then secondly, he appears to have been a priest. A priest was someone who stood in the middle, and who mediated between you and God, who stood and confessed the sin of Israel on behalf of the people.

And then he was also a king, a kind of king. He was never crowned, but because he was the leader of Israel, he was the judge, he was regarded as almost a king.

So, he fulfilled these three functions of a prophet, a priest, and a king. Now, you know, if you're familiar with your Bible, you know where this is going.

He fulfilled these three functions that were ultimately fulfilled by the prophet, the priest, and the king, who is none other, of course, than the Lord Jesus Christ.

[26 : 41] And in this respect, Samuel looked forward, he prefigured the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. And there is only one way to come into a relationship with God and to be restored to a relationship with God, and that is through the person and the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Every time we read about a sacrifice in the Old Testament, it looks forward to what Jesus would one day do in giving himself on the cross for our forgiveness, because it's only by his death that there is forgiveness for our sins.

I mean, after all, what's the point in repenting and turning away if at the end of the day there is no forgiveness? But as Christians, we can say, I know that there's forgiveness. I know that because I've come to discover the mercy and the love and the grace of God.

How do you come to discover that? By Jesus Christ, by looking at Jesus, by examining Jesus, and by coming to faith in him and asking him to be our prophet and our priest and our king.

As our prophet, we listen to him and to his word. As our priest, we rely exclusively upon his finished work on the cross.

[28 : 12] And as our king, we obey him as his subjects, as his willing and loving subjects. That's what it means to be in relationship with Jesus Christ.

That's what it means to be a Christian. And tonight, as we rediscover our own sinfulness, and as we return to God, as we should do, every time we meet together like this, we do so in the name of Jesus.

Only in his name, because there is no other name given amongst men under heaven whereby we must be saved. Let me ask you if you have ever known Jesus tonight, or are you a stranger?

Are you on the outside of all of this? Are you perhaps wondering, well, what is this all about? Well, God's message to you tonight is that you need him more than anything else in all the world.

Right now, his message to you is make this your first priority. And in the pages of the Bible, and in the person of Jesus Christ, there is forgiveness for you.

[29 : 34] Not only so, there is newness of life. Jesus promises you newness of life. If any man or any woman be in Christ, says Paul, they are a new creation.

So, if you would like to come to know the reality of the living God this evening, the door has been opened by Jesus in his death on the cross.

And the life that he offers you is a gift. It's not something that you need to go through some kind of religious procession. It's a gift, a free gift that he offers you, in which by taking that gift, your life can be changed forever, can be transformed.

You can be raised to newness of life, a life that never ends, a life that extends beyond death itself and into eternity.

And so, whether you're a Christian this evening and for you this evening is a place where you can examine yourself and discover the grace of God afresh and be restored as we prepare for another stressful working week.

[31 : 06] Or, if you're not a Christian and you need to discover God through Jesus for the first time, then this gospel is for you. This is God's message for you.

It's not the church's message, it's God's message. for you. And God is inviting you to come to know him through Jesus Christ.

And I really hope tonight that as you listen to this, that you will come personally. We read about how the children of Israel, they came personally to God.

I hope that you will come personally to Jesus and ask him to show himself to you and to change your life by bringing you to faith in him.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you for how even an obscure passage like this, it points us to Jesus, where everything points us in the Bible.

[32 : 11] and we pray that the simplicity of what Jesus did on the cross will be made clear to us afresh this evening. We ask Lord for those who are struggling in their Christian lives, in their Christian faith.

We ask Father that a new vision of the mercy of God will be given to them, that will draw them into repentance and into a renewed fellowship with you.

We pray for anyone amongst us or anybody watching who's not yet a believer. And we pray that the message of the free offer of the gospel will reach them by the power of the Holy Spirit and draw them into a faith relationship with Jesus and that you will teach them, that you will lead them and open up their hearts and give them to discover the greatness, the joy of sins forgiven, of newness of life, the liberty of serving Jesus and knowing him for themselves.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, let's sing. Let's sing.