

From Ichabod to Ebenezer: Power of Remembrance
1 Samuel 7

“If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods...and serve Him only”

Introduction: Forgetfulness is the enemy of faith, and we are all prone to forget. This is one of the reasons why the study of history is so vital. In 1905, philosopher and writer George Santayana penned the famous and oft repeated (or kind of paraphrased) statement: *“Those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it”*, which Winston Churchill grabbed as part of a speech to parliament in 1948: *“Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it”*. We have short memories, have an out-of-sight, out-of-mind mentality, and lose perspective quickly. This is why *memorials* have such power in ours and every other culture.

One of the best co-curricular activities that Grace School invests in is a robust trip to the East coast every year for each 8th grade class in order to study American history. It is well done and actually a phenomenal value (speaks to my frugal heart). Scattered throughout museums, battlefields, and buildings are a large number of memorials, each crystallizing a particular event, person, or time in history. We'll put up five of these famous and well known memorials visited, and as they come up on the screen, it should elicit some amount of thought or emotion. **Lincoln Memorial** – tears brought to my eyes as we read the Gettysburg address and 2nd inaugural speech as Lincoln tried to unite a divided country and fight for the freedom of all people; **Washington Memorial** – reminds us that George was not only our first president but that he decidedly did NOT want to be king and divested power which he COULD have acquired; **Vietnam Memorial** – All war memorials are emotional (WWII, Korean, Civil, WWI), but the vast number of names on a sacred wall is a reminder of the heroism and sacrifice of so many in war without a decisive victory and a muddled purpose; **Statue of Liberty** – a vivid reminder of a celebration of the abolition of slavery and the continued fight for liberty; **9/11 Memorial** – Sobering reminder that we are NOT ultimately in control, that safety is ultimately in the Lord's hand, and that when there is a greater purpose or goal for an eclectic group of people, unity is possible as was seen AFTER the attacks in NY. Each of these helps successive generations remember what happened, perhaps *why* something happened, and allows both the celebration of the past and gives knowledge for future decisions.

As we come to this next section in 1 Samuel, we will see a powerful *memorial* given by the LORD to the people of Israel so they could remember the past to gain confidence in the future by faith. What we will find is a people moving from defeat, sorrow, and lament to one of restoration, repentance, and strength. The method or means of this change is exactly the same available to us today, which begins and ends with our view of God, ourselves, and how we bridge the two.

In order to understand 1 Samuel 7, we must go back in our minds to 1 Samuel 4. Last week we looked at chapters 5 and 6, which focused on the Ark of the Covenant and God's 7 month victory tour throughout Philistia. But chapter 4 is truly the bookend of our current chapter, so a quick review will help set the stage to understand what God is teaching.

In 1 Samuel 4, we had the story of abject defeat of Israel by the Philistines, leaving them desperate, defeated, with death all around, and the concluding word was **Ichabod**, recognizing that the glory of God had departed. But looking a bit deeper and broader, we see *why this happened*. Israel had allowed

their **greatest goal** to become the preservation of a happy family and life, ceasing to press for obedience and discipline in the home, which lead to *everyone doing what was right in their own eyes*. This is equivalent to today's mantra: follow your heart and do what make you happy! The fact that this was the greatest goal, it meant their **greatest threat was EXTERNAL forces** – in this case the Philistines. This coastal nation threatened their existence, way of life, and happiness. *What do people think the greatest external threat to their happiness is today?* This shaped their **view of God**, which meant they saw God as someone who could be controlled or manipulated, as seen by brings “god in a box” to battle hoping IT would fight and win their battle versus their greatest threat. The **view of worship** was marginal, meaning God simply wanted token engagement and nominal commitment, and their **view of self was high** – deserving of victory, ease, comfort and happiness. In other words, in chapter 4, there was an entire worldview that sums up most people for all time, including people, even in churches, today. Unfortunately, this worldview ALWAYS crumbles as God is pushed to the side in rebellion, and the downstream result is eventual misery.

What we will see in chapter 7 is a reversal of thinking and practice, from the greatest goal (serve and please the Lord), to the greatest threat (our own sin & the enemy within) to a view of God which says He is a God to be adored and worshipped, not leveraged, and the pathway is through repentance by faith through an atoning work. This is a CATEGORICAL difference, and in Israel it came about by the leadership of Samuel for a generation. For us today, it is shaped by our view of the work of Christ on our behalf, and how actively we remember it.

CATEGORICAL SHIFT REDIRECTED (3-4)

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 hands of the Philistines.’ So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroath, and they served the LORD only.”

Last week we left off with the Ark resting at Kireat-Jearim, and the text says that it rested there for 20 years while the people lamented. Over that amount of time, though God demonstrated His power over them, the Philistines still imposed military dominance over the people, which also came with a high level of influence. Mixed with the spiritual weakness at the time, it was a recipe for Israel to adopt the gods and worship of their foe and to begin to practice detestable things. **Whenever people are weak in terms of convictions they are prone to being influenced by any culture they presently reside.** A lack of passionate pursuit of God leaves people open to adopting cultural norms, sanitizing and justifying all kinds of wicked thought and action. It is clear that Israel had adopted Baal and Ashtaroath worship, which was the male and female god and goddess of the Philistines. These were the gods over the harvest and fertility, and one of the ways that a person could *worship* to ensure a good harvest was to participate in *sexual rituals*. One could see the appeal. You can either go to the Tabernacle for a prayer meeting or engage in sexual immorality to make sure it's a good crop this year! Material gain and sexual pleasure are ALWAYS temptations, and when God is cut out of the mix, the only thing left is dealing with guilt and shame, nagging issues when we are in rebellion against God. Today, these two activities ARE STILL worshipped and have become the gods of so many.

It's amazing what an impact true, godly leadership can have on a place and people. Along comes Samuel, now old enough and seasoned enough to lead, and he began a categorical shift that a whole generation of people had never experienced. Samuel knew that the enemy the people should have been concerned with was the besetting enemy **within** the individual people and the nation as a whole. Stop the blame shifting, cease to seek the preservation of comfort, and halt fighting an artificial enemy,

and instead **turn back to the LORD**. Without saying the word, Samuel was calling the people to **repent of their sin** and follow the Lord. No more half measures, marginal worship, half-hearted sacrifice, and attempts to manipulate God. This was a call to full and complete transformational change. ***What did this entail?***

- **Whole Hearted Redirection** – Notice that in this verse the heart is targeted twice: “with all your heart” and “direct your heart”. Why is this so important? The heart was the seat of the will and it represents a person’s volitional choice and root of desire. It has to do with choices we make, the desires we chase, and knowledge we comprehend. When the Holy Spirit begins to convict someone of their sin, be it for the first time in an unbeliever or the thousandth time for a believer, there will be an awareness of sin, a hatred of sin, remorse over sin, a desire to stop sinning, and a choice to stop sinning. *Everyone FEELS grief when they sin*, in the form of some level of guilt or shame. The difference between someone who genuinely knows Christ and someone who does NOT is in their response: *‘For godly grief produces repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death’* (2 Cor. 7:10). Sorrow over sin is the beginning, but this sorrow must be followed by a **forsaking of sin and a new obedience in completely turning to the LORD**. This is why wholeheartedness is the requirement, since God Himself, not His gifts, becomes the object of our turning.
 - **Putting Away ALL false idols (and disobedience)** – What does this step of forsaking look like? For Israel, it meant a very real and tangible step of PUTTING AWAY the idols they had adopted over time. This would have been **difficult but possible**. It would have meant a shift of loyalties, friendship, time spent, and priorities. They had to turn their back on the course of their life that had been developed and played out for years. For us, it is just as difficult. It is identifying not just objects but also the ways we’ve been following culture instead of Biblical truth. Just take the ideas of *materialism and sexual immorality* and we can see how hard it is for people to put them away. We can easily begin to look and live like **everyone else** around, having the same passions for stuff and justifying the same deviant sexual behavior that is normative in culture. In fact, saying that we believe sexual activity is ONLY for the context of marriage is now laughable in our culture, and causes a distrustful eye to go along with a hearty disdain. Just like Israel, professed Christians can justify all kinds of sin relative to the culture. **True repentance does not look to hold onto sin but rid oneself of it completely, so everything is on the table, from how we think to what we’ve practiced, to how we spend our time and money.**
 - **Serving God alone** – God does not compete for our affections, and He is not a needy deity. But He is demanding. His name is Jealous and He will not share His glory with another, so He will not put up with a divided heart of His people. **Serving here is synonymous with worship, or giving Him glory in all areas.** We ultimately will serve what we worship; willing to sacrifice for what is most valuable.
1. Far from being a quid pro quo transaction, God was clear: if they returned to Him, He would do the same (Zech. 1:3). Here, God promised to deliver them from the Philistines. But this was NOT A NEW PROMISE, simply a reiteration of an old one (Deut. 28:7; Lev. 26:8)! If Israel walked faithfully with the Lord, He would make their enemies shake and flee. This was simply God reminding them of His Word. We are offered forgiveness and restoration, joy and contentment, and a future secured in Christ as a result of repentance.

2. **Spiritual revival is always joined with a passion for holiness and obedience** – This is why we do NOT try to overcook your emotions in a service! Stirring up the affections artificially only produce short term yields, but true change happens when we are convinced and convicted by our sin in light of the holiness of God and commit to real change, which means a hatred of sin and delight in holiness to please God. Any personal or corporate revival that does not major on putting away sin and adopting holiness is short lived at best and a fake show of emotionalism at worst.
3. **The time to come back to God, or come to Him the first time, is now** – This is no small thing, since it will NOT always be this way. But the beautiful picture we have of God's interaction with Israel is His **longsuffering love and multiplied mercy** poured out on them. Even after decades of decay, God still opened His arms wide and offered forgiveness to His people. All that was required was faith, faith that led to repentance and return. If you have been mired in your sin, going through the motions, treading in tradition with no joy because God is distant, NOW IS THE TIME to **REPENT!** Turn to God with your whole heart, put away your sin, and serve and worship Him alone. And what should you do tomorrow and the next day? The same thing!

CATEGORICAL SHIFT REALIZED (5-11)

*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.***

Once the people made a decision to follow the counsel of Samuel and return to the Lord, three distinctive things happened:

1. **Samuel prayed for them** – Repentance and prayer go hand in hand, as does worship (although that seems like three hands). Prayer is the ultimate temperature gauge of our dependency and delight in the LORD, and spiritual health cannot be attained without it. Notice in verse 8 there was a distinctive difference between the people in chapter 4:3 and now. In chapter 4, they were hoping "IT", the Ark, would save them. Here, they called on Samuel to cry out to the "**LORD OUR GOD for us, that HE may save us from the hand of the Philistines.**" What a shift of mindset and recognition. No longer leveraging God but trusting Him. Prayer is the deciding factor between the two.
2. **They publically confessed their sin (v. 6)** – Sin not only causes us to do stupid things, but the deceptive nature of sin convinces us to keep our sin hidden, quiet, and out of sight. Deny, deny, deny is the mantra of sin itself that is often adopted. But, confession of sin is one the most freeing realities in our life with Christ, and public confession simply makes it real. Confessing sin to others means we are no longer trying to put on a false face or present ourselves as better than we actually are. This was a pathway of strength for Israel, not weakness. Regularly confession sin to each other keeps us out of the deceptiveness of sin itself, and we know that God uses clean vessels for His purposes (2 Tim. 2:21).
3. **Sacrifice was made** – Sin has to have satisfaction and must be paid for, not merely forgotten. The people confessed their sin and they faced a threat of the Philistines knocking on their door. The Philistines did not like that the people of Israel gathered en masse at Mizpah, so they drew up to do battle to break it up. This time, Israel was afraid. But also, this time they knew the

issue to be dealt with. So Samuel offered up a **nursing lamb** as a guilt offering sacrifice, since with the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness of sin (Heb. 9:22). Israel knew that the enemy that loomed larger than the Philistines was their own sin, so they had to deal with that **FIRST since only God could deal with the other enemy.**

Now, the people were set up for true, long term, and proper victory. We should delight greatly in the outcome of this story: the Philistines ready to roll over Israel AGAIN, and instead, **the LORD THUNDERED with a mighty sound** and defeated them, leaving Israel to do clean-up duty. God is always the One who fights our battles, defeats enemies, and when His hand is on us it is also against our enemies. God was faithful to His promise, and ended up restoring the land that had been taken decades earlier and brought peace to the land – for all the days that Samuel was a judge.

CATEGORICAL SHIFT REMEMBERED (12-14)

*“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.*

Great story and good ending, but that is NOT the final instruction. After God’s decisive victory, Samuel did something odd but monumental. He took a large stone, set it up between two towns, and named the stone **Ebenezer**, which means “Stone of Help”, and it signified the fact that **“till now the LORD has helped us.”** Let’s consider a few reasons why this is so important and helpful:

1. **Memorials in the Bible are not new** – When Joshua entered into the Promised Land with the people, God parted the Jordan River and they all crossed on dry ground. They took 12 stones from the river and set them up at Gilgal with the purpose of, when their children would ask why the stones were there (in each successive generation), fathers could tell their children what God did there that day, and so all the peoples of the earth would know that the hand of the LORD is mighty (Joshua 4:19-24)
2. **The Past Helps us in the Present and Future** – The phrase “Till now” is a bit odd, isn’t it? Does that mean there’s a question whether He will continue being helpful? The answer is to look at the past. Remember, back in 1 Samuel 4, Israel was encamped at Ebenezer when they were soundly defeated. Was God faithful to help them then?!?! The answer is a resounding: YES! God had been gracious and merciful in the past to help them through their self inflicted defeat, and now had helped them escape defeat! *“All that was lost through sin in the first Ebenezer event was restored through repentance in the second.”* (Robert Bergen) When we remember what God has done for us faithfully in the past, it informs our present and gives confidence for the future. *“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 home.”* (Richard Phillips) When we forget what God has done for us corporately (in His death and resurrection) and personally (blessing of faith, provision, etc.), we struggle with our present circumstances and trials.
3. **We have an Ebenezer today** – Today, the cross is our memorial stone that we look on with gratitude and hopefulness, and the way we remember corporately is in the Lord’s Table or communion. Looking to the cross, where God gave his own Son to save us from our sins, no Christ can truly doubt God’s help. This is why Robert Robinson wrote the words to the timeless hymn *“Come thou Fount of Every Blessing”*: *“Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by thy help I come;*

And I hope, by thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home” 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 wandering heart to thee.”

As we come to the communion table and respond in singing this hymn, we are reminded of this: we all need to confess and repent of our sin. There are areas of our lives that have not been yielded, areas that do not glorify God, and sin that has not been turned from. So we REMEMBER that we come to the cross of Christ, who made a once for all sacrifice to pay the price of our sin in full, so that we could return to the Lord and serve Him only. We can always come back, and we are welcomed with open arms of a Savior who died for us, and requires us to believe and repent, to turn from our sin towards Him, and to hate our sin and serve Him alone, all to our joy and restoration. He is our stone of help, and moves us from **Ichabod to Ebenezer, from the glory departing because of our sin to the stone of help, the cross and repentance for restoration.**