

Part 10 – The Gospel According to Samuel

1 Samuel 7:3–17

Chapter 7 marks the return of Samuel. He has been recognized throughout Israel as the prophet of the Lord. Twenty years had passed since the ark was returned to Israel, and yet during that time, every indication was that she had not repented of her ways. Sin produces ruts that are very hard to escape. The final clauses of verse two tell us that Israel's grief was finally turning in the right direction: "…A long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord." There was once again wailing heard in Israel, but this time it was the wailing of repentance. The time was ripe for Samuel to preach the gospel.

1. The Message

Vs. 3 – "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart…" – Samuel did not immediately assume that what he saw was genuine repentance. Repentance means a change of mind and to set a new course. Repentance is far more than grief or regret. It is normal for those who do not know the Lord to regret and even weep over poor decisions, but godly repentance always involves the dual responses of sorrow over sin and a return to the Lord "with all your heart." The real problem for the Israelites was not the Philistines but their own sin. The proclamation of God's gracious salvation will be incomplete if not accompanied by a call to repent.

Samuel calls the people to "put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you…" "Ashtaroth" or "Ashtoreth" was the Canaanite goddess also referred to as "Astarte." She was the wife of Baal, the storm god associated with fertility. The worship of Baal and Ashtaroth typically involved sexual immorality as a way to coax their powers of fertility. It is hard to imagine that the people of Israel had allowed themselves to fall into such wickedness for years.

In addition to calling them to abandon their sin, Samuel's message included the command to return to the Lord: "…direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only…" God's people must have a single-minded commitment to the Lord which drives out sin. Thomas Chalmers called it the "expulsive power of a new affection."

Samuel's gospel message included not only repentance but also the gracious promise of God to deliver his people: "…and he will deliver you out of the hands of Philistines." The Philistines had been the instrument God used to bring his sinning people back to himself. Samuel's message is quite simple: "Repent and God will save you." It is the same message preached by the prophets, by John the Baptist, by Jesus, and by the apostles.

Vs. 4 – The people respond to Samuel's message. They truly repented, that is, they turned away from their sin and turned in faith to the Lord. And in response, the Lord delivered his people. He gave them new life characterized by renewed strength and peace.

When God's people are strong, they eventually become apathetic, which leads to wickedness. What follows next is downfall and desperation, and sometimes even exile. The only pathway for deliverance begins with repentance. That's the pattern throughout the Bible. It is the general pattern throughout the history of the church. When we find ourselves beset with spiritual apathy and sin, we must grieve our sins and return to the Lord, who is full of grace and promises to save.

2. The Mediator

Vs. 5 – Mizpah, some eight miles north of Jerusalem, was an important rendezvous point for Israel in the period of the Judges. It is to Mizpah that Samuel calls the people to gather. From there he states: "I will pray to the Lord for you." Here we see an already familiar pattern that will only become increasingly clear in redemptive history: sinners' need for a divinely provided mediator. During the wilderness days, Moses was God's appointed mediator for the people. This pattern highlighted the fact that God is impeccably holy, and therefore sinners cannot simply present themselves to him. They must have someone represent them. Samuel would fulfill that purpose in his day.

Vs. 6 – There have been various explanations for the act of pouring water out on the ground before the Lord. It seems to be connected to the people's fasting, so it may be an expression of self-denial, but it may

also be an outward display of their inner grief.[1] Psalm 22 is a prophetic psalm pointing to the agony of Christ on the cross: "I am poured out like water…" In Lamentations 2:19, the pleas of God's people are expressed as pouring out of their hearts "like water." A similar connection to distress is stated in 2 Samuel 14:14: "Like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered, so we must die." These are expressions of deep spiritual distress, so this act of pouring water out before the Lord may well have been the people's way of saying, "We have wasted ourselves in sin and are utterly bereft of any ability to repair the damage done."
The statement about Samuel's leadership is important in the larger context, this being the beginning of the account of Israel's demand for a king. Samuel is prophet, priest, and judge for Israel.
Vs. 7 – At any hint that the Israelites were conspiring to reassert their sovereignty, the Philistines responded immediately and forcefully. Notice the reversal from Chapter 4. Now it is the Philistines who are bold and the Israelites who are frightened.
Vs. 8 – A sign of the genuineness of Israel's repentance is that they make no move to employ the ark for their purposes. Instead, they turn to their mediator Samuel and plead with him to intercede on their behalf. Again, a stark contrast to their response to the Philistine threat in Chapter 4.
Vs. 9 – Samuel interceded both for Israel's forgiveness (the burnt offering was to make atonement) and for her deliverance in the present crisis. Samuel is functioning here as a priest. (It was highly unusual for a man to be a prophet and a priest; add to that the fact that Samuel was also a judge.)
Vv. 10-11 – Notice the close connection between the offering of atonement and the destruction of the Philistine army. This was the Lord's victory, not Samuel's and not Israel's. Samuel is not a warrior judge, such as Gideon or Samson, but a leader who brought Israel into a right relationship with God, who then interceded for his people and gained the victory for them.
This is an extraordinary moment for Israel. Their humility and desperation over their sin has born fruit. God keeps his promise. In 1 Samuel, "this is the first time that the Lord has acted positively toward Israel or an Israelite since chapter one when he heard and answered Hannah's prayer and Samuel was born."[2]

3. The Mercy
Vs. 12 – In yet another reversal, the place now named *Ebenezer*, was the scene of Israel's catastrophe with the ark more than twenty years prior. The Lord made clear that Israel's fortunes had been reversed because she trusted in him. The memorial set up by Samuel is called "Stone of Help" or "Stone of the Helper." The place of their humiliating defeat was now the place of their merciful deliverance.
Vv. 13-14 – Far from a single victory in a single battle, by her faith in the Lord, Israel gained back lost territory, subdued the Philistine threat, and gained peace with her neighbors through most of the rest of Samuel's life. *Amorites* is a term covering the indigenous Canaanite population still residing within the borders of the Promised Land. "In other words, Israel was safe both internally and externally."[3]
Vv. 15-16 – Samuel was the last of the judges though his judgeship is rather unique in that he was not a man of physical or military force. His judgeship was focused on the spiritual condition of Israel, serving them as a mediator before the Lord. He traveled across Israel on a regular circuit to perform his duties.
Vs. 17 – At the conclusion of each circuit across Israel, Samuel would return to his hometown of Ramah. Even there, he continued in his mediatorial role. In addition to this, he added another sacred location to the land by building an altar to the Lord at Ramah. Notice that in the last three verses, it is mentioned three times that Samuel judged Israel. His role was like that of Moses, to keep Israel in a right relationship with God. The narrator is setting up the contrast between Samuel's judging Israel and the people's demand for a different kind of ruler, an earthly king.

The leadership Israel needed was spiritual leadership. Specifically, the leadership of the Lord's chosen mediator, one who stands before the altar on their behalf. And this the Lord provided for them in Samuel. But how much more so would the Lord provide the necessary Mediator for his people in the person of Jesus! As our Prophet, Jesus speaks and embodies the word of the Lord. As our Priest, he is both our Mediator and the very sacrifice provided for our sins. As our King, he is the leader our wandering hearts require.

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[1] Gordon Keddie, *1 Samuel*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Great Britain: Evangelical Press, 1988) pp. 91-92
[2] John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008) p. 132
[3] David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) p. 240