

Turning Back to God

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Date: 02 September 2018

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[0 : 00] Alistair took us on a whistle-stop tour through 1 Samuel chapters 4 to 6. There we saw what happened when Israel rejected God, how they were defeated in battle, how the Ark was captured, how God showed his power to the Philistines and his power over their false gods.

And we were reminded once again how big our God is. So this week, we'll see if the Israelites have learnt their lesson.

If having seen the humiliation of the pagan gods, will they now enthusiastically and faithfully worship God and serve him only?

Finally, we'll be looking at the passage in four sections, as is on the screen. I'm afraid if you're wanting an exciting PowerPoint, that's what you've got.

But yeah, so let's read the passage together and then see what God has to say to us through it. 1 Samuel 7, and starting at verse 1.

[1 : 19] So the men of Kiriath-Jerim came and took up the Ark of the Lord. They took it to Abinadab's house on the hill and consecrated Eliezer, his son, to guard the Ark of the Lord.

It was a long time, twenty years in all, that the Ark remained at Kiriath-Jerim. And all the people of Israel mourned and sought after the Lord.

And Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, If you're 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.

And he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines. So the Israelites put away their bales and Ashtoreths and served the Lord only.

Then Samuel said, Assemble all Israel at Mizpah, and I will intercede with the Lord for you. When he had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord.

[2 : 28] On that day they fasted, and there they confessed, We have sinned against the Lord. And Samuel was leader of Israel at Mizpah.

When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled at Mizpah, the rulers of the Philistines came up to attack them. And when the Israelites heard of it, they were afraid because of the Philistines. They said to Samuel, Do not stop crying out to the Lord our God for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines. Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering to the Lord.

He cried out to the Lord on Israel's behalf, and the Lord answered him. While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle.

But that day the Lord thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines, and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites. The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth-kar.

[3 : 41] Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shenn. He named it Ebenezer, saying, Thus far has the Lord helped us.

So the Philistines were subdued and did not invade Israelite territory again. Throughout Samuel's lifetime, the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines.

The towns from Ekron to Gath that the Philistines had captured from Israel were restored to her.

And Israel delivered the neighboring territory from the power of the Philistines.

And there was peace between Israel and the Amorites. Samuel continued as judge over Israel all the days of his life. From year to year he went on a circuit from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah, judging Israel in all those places.

But he always went back to Ramah, where his home was. And there he also judged Israel. And he built an altar there to the Lord. We see here at the beginning of our passage that the Ark of the

Covenant has been returned to Israel.

[4 : 56] Following the defeat of the Israelites and the capture of the Ark by the Philistines, it has now been returned. But it's been 20 years since then.

And nothing is recorded as having happened in that period. But we do have a clue as to something that has been going on.

A couple of weeks ago, back at the end of chapter 3, we read, The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up. And he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground.

And all Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord. The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh.

And there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word. And Samuel's word came to all Israel. Although we're not told what happened during those 20 years, it's reasonable to speculate that this continued.

[6 : 05] Samuel continued to travel around the country, faithfully proclaiming the word of God to people whose reception was, at best, lukewarm.

There's no mention of any actual opposition. But for 20 years, there's not much response either. Some may have listened.

But as a whole, the nation is far from God. While it does seem that the worship of God is still going on in some form, although no mention of the tabernacle or priests or anything like that, it's combined with the worship of Baals and Ashtoreths of the surrounding nations.

Just like we saw through the whole of the book of Judges, they keep turning to these foreign gods. And unlike some TV historians that think they're being really clever when they point out all this evidence of polytheism in ancient Israel, well, actually, the Bible's brutally honest about it.

All the way through, right from the beginning, the worship of God goes on alongside the worship of other local false deities. But then, in the end of verse 2 here, something changes.

[7 : 34] That still, small voice they've been hearing through the word of Samuel suddenly seems not to be just an annoying nagging, but something of infinite significance as we read that all of the people of Israel mourned and sought after the Lord.

This is not just the turning of one or two people, but this is the turning of a nation as a whole. It's more akin to the early chapters of Acts, where we read of thousands being saved every day. or like some of the major revivals, like the one that took place in Lewis in the middle of last century. Duncan Campbell, a preacher from the faith mission who was very much used in that, said, there's a world of difference between a crusade, a special effort in evangelism, and revival.

We praise God for such movements, but is it not true that such movements as a general rule fail to catch the community?

The community remains more or less the same, and the masses go past us to hell. But in revival, the community suddenly becomes conscious of the movings of God, so that in a matter of hours, not days, in a matter of hours, churches become crowded.

[9 : 12] No inclination of any special meetings, but something happening that moves men and women to the house of God. And you find within hours, scores of men and women crying to God for mercy before or near a church.

It seems that that is what's happening here in Israel. after 20 years of faithful witness with apparently little to show for it, the nation as a whole mourns its sin and seeks God.

Around the world today, there are many working hard, faithfully proclaiming the gospel, but seeing little fruit. there are many who dedicate their whole lives taking the gospel to places where it has never been heard and may at most see a handful of converts in their lifetime.

And there are many faithfully ministering to small, struggling congregations week in, week out and seeing little fruit for their labour.

Across this city today, the word of God will be faithfully preached in many churches. Many will also have various other outreach efforts going on.

[10 : 38] And yet, most of the city will carry on oblivious to all this, thinking that's of no relevance to them. Or there are many of you who in your own lives are faithful witnesses to family, to friends.

You've been praying for years, longing for God to work in their life, and so far have seen no response. But like Samuel, this is out with our control.

We cannot bring anyone to Christ. All we can do is be faithful to God's calling on our lives, to be faithful in prayer, to be faithful in our witness, in whatever form that might take.

God will work in his own way and in his own timing. We may see the fruit of our work or we may not. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, I planted the seed, Apollos watered, but God has been making it grow.

Without God, Paul's work and Apollos' work would have been nothing. Or maybe it's you that's in those years of silence.

[12 : 05] Maybe it's you that for the first time or for the thousand and first time needs to hear the voice of God calling you back to himself. As Jim Reeves sang in an old song, How long has it been since you talked with the Lord and told him your heart's hidden secrets?

How long since you prayed? How long since you stayed on your knees till the light shone through? How long has it been since your mind felt at ease?

How long since your heart knew no burden? Can you call him your friend? How long has it been since you knew that he cared for you?

How long have you been hearing that nagging voice that you've been ignoring? How long have you been coming here week after week and feeling challenged and convicted by sermons that you hear and then walking straight out the door and doing nothing?

How long have you been thinking I need to sort things out someday? As another song says come home come home you who are weary come home earnestly tenderly Jesus is calling calling oh sinner come home but we see in the next section in verses three to six that it's not just some vague turning back that's called for it's a total commitment of their lives that is required as we've been hearing about earlier Samuel challenges the people as Joshua had before if you are returning to God with all your hearts then rid yourselves of all the foreign gods and the asterisks and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only they have a choice to make if they're going to return to [14 : 22] God it must be wholehearted they can't just come to God for what they can get out of him while continuing their worship of idols God Yahweh the Lord the infinite eternal almighty one the creator and sustainer of the universe the redeemer of his people and the judge of all the earth will not share his place with others this is not because he's some sort of petty deity who is insecure and jealous of his rivals but because he alone is God and to worship anything else alongside him is to show that we haven't understood at all what worship means we haven't grasped how unimaginably immense and awesome he is and yet time and time again Israel did turn to other gods to idols of wood stone gold and silver the first commandment that was given to

Moses on Mount Sinai you shall have no other gods before me but then at the end of his life God tells Moses these people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering they will forsake me and we we do the same and the temptation to follow other gods is a real one in supposedly secular Scotland today this is not a land made up of atheists and Christians there are many who follow other religions and there are many who follow no defined religion but are looking for spiritual experiences wherever they can find them as a tendency to syncretism to the pick and mix attitude to religion that taking a bit from here and a bit from there the bits that you like the bits that you're comfortable with

I recently saw a discussion online as to whether you could be both a Christian and a Buddhist and while a few seemed to think that it was problematic as they do have fundamentally conflicting beliefs many seem to see no problem in it at all but for most of us today the temptation probably is not to follow other deities real though that might be but to put other things beside God on the pedestal things that we find more tangible things that claim to satisfy us here and now and yet can never satisfy many of these things may be good gifts from God work family food music art travel nature politics whatever it is that's important to you but we have put them in the place of God as Paul writes to the Romans we have worshipped and served created things rather than the creator but so often what we put in his place is such a distorted twisted version of what is good that it can no longer be called good at all we claim to worship

God and yet what fills our time what fills our minds what consumes our bank balances may suggest otherwise like the Israelites we need to come to God and mourn the state of our wretched hearts and confess our sin to him we need to put away from us anything that we have put in his place it's probably in some ways easier when that is physical idols that you can physically remove from your house but the challenge is just as real as William Cowper in his great hymn says the dearest idol I have known what e'er that idol be help me to tear it from thy throne and worship only thee and that is what we see the Israelites doing here they listen to Samuel and they get rid of their foreign gods they come together and they publicly confess their sins and ask

Samuel to intercede with God for them their fasting their rituals their sacrifices may seem alien to us today and I'm not really sure and commentators don't seem to be sure either what this pouring out water is all about but these things in themselves are not what matters to God but by them they demonstrate outwardly and publicly how seriously they are taking this they commit once again as their ancestors have so many times that they will serve God and God only and Samuel the man who has been bringing God's word to them for all these years offers sacrifice and praise to God for them but we today know more than they ever could know that if we confess our sins he is faithful and just he will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness the final sacrifice has been offered and no further sacrifice is required but then as we move into the next section we see that the

[21 : 05] Israelites are gathered together and their trust in God was going to be put to the test right there and then the Philistines have got word of the fact that a huge number of the Israelites are gathered together in one place and they're there for a religious ceremony they're not there prepared for battle this seems too good an opportunity to miss and so they come and attack them back in chapter 4 when they were facing defeat from the Philistines Israel tried to use God's power to their own ends as they took the ark out into battle as if it was some sort of magic object something whose power they could wield and summon at will and to demonstrate by their actions in the later chapters that actually they had no reverence or fear of the

God whose presence the ark represented so will they do better this time or was their repentance just a flash in the pan no this time instead of arrogantly claiming God's power as their own they call on Samuel to continue to intercede for them they fully recognise their position their dependence on God that only he can save them and as he has promised God fought for them and the Philistines are defeated last week when they tried to use God they were defeated but when they turn to God in dependence on him God throws the Philistines into a complete panic and they are totally routed what will we do when the trials come when life hurts is our faith in

God such that we still trust in him and cry out to him in dependence when the challenges come when faced with sickness death unemployment breakdown of relationships loneliness fear temptation whatever is our theology strong enough our view of God big enough that we don't just worship him when things are easy when we can clearly see his abundant blessing but do we turn to him in dependence when we struggle to see the way ahead him would ask the almost laughable rhetorical question have you trials and temptations is there trouble anywhere well yeah of course we do of course there is but I would continue we should never be discouraged take it to the Lord in prayer do we or do we try and struggle on do we turn to our own resources to get us through and leave

God out of the picture until we've got time for him do we only want to use God's power when it suits us or do we want to surrender to his will can we sing whatever may pass that has taught me to say it is well it is well with my soul do we as we were thinking this morning trust that good shepherd who knows us who calls us by name who laid down his life for us and will let nothing snatch us out of his hands the security of our salvation does not depend on our ability to cling to God but of his powerful hands holding us and that is something we can depend on and so we come to the final section verses 12 to 17 we see that Samuel knows that it's not enough for them to have a one-off experience of God the challenge for them is to go on with him to go back home from their mountaintop experience to their ordinary lives and to live out those lives day by day following him and not turn away again so Samuel sets up this stone a monument as a reminder to them as Gary mentioned earlier he gives the stone this strange name

Ebenezer to most of us today if we know the word at all it's Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens Christmas Carol and as such it's associated with a miserly unpleasant character but that's not what it's about instead it just literally means rock of help and Samuel explains its meaning for by saying thus far has the Lord helped us Samuel's drawing a line in the sand he's placing a landmark in time as a monument to what has happened as a very visible and tangible reminder that they can look back on and remember the commitment they made there on that day this may seem slightly strange to us in our modern world setting up a standing stone seems a strange almost prehistoric thing to do but actually if you think about it we set up monuments all over the place to far less significant things the number of tourists that come to see a statue of a dog in

[27 : 25] Edinburgh for goodness sake but I think it's important for us to have these monuments in our lives most of the time they will not be physical monuments standing stones plaques whatever

but there will be events dates that are fixed in our minds times that we can look back on and remember what God has done for us in the past one of the most obvious ones to many of us will be our baptism a time when we decided to publicly nail our colours to the mast and declare what we were building our lives on although far more deeply etched in my memory as the night a few weeks before when I was trying to work on a unique project that needed done for the next day and I just could not focus it was as if

God was saying to me no I'm not going to let you think about anything else until you pick up the phone and phone the elders and tell them you want to be baptised and so I did and got the project finished but for any of you that are considering it remember there's great opportunity to discuss it at Graham's on Thursday yep got a nod there and there's a baptismal service planned at the end of the month so if you've not done it before is this the time is this the opportunity for you to set up that monument to what God has done for you in your life but there are many other times that we remember times that are etched on our mind times when our experience with God was so real so powerful times when we've prayed with

Moses don't send me from this place unless you go with me I can think of several times wrestling with God sitting on a rock in the Braid Hermitage walking along the beach at school on a starry night that was absolutely mind blowing long conversation down beside the croquis club on the links where things were shared that started a really deep friendship that has made your shaped my life all of these are events that I can look back on as evidence evidence that God is at work in my life even if it's not always so easy to see but these monuments whether physical or purely mental which help us to remember what God has done are not about living in the past in saying thus far has the Lord helped us we're not saying and who knows whether he'll carry on doing it we're saying look at the wonderful things he's done in the past we have tasted and seen that the Lord is good therefore we can trust in that faithfulness for the future and so having raised their monument the Israelites must go on and live for him in the light of what has happened there at Mizpah the remainder of the chapter is an account of how this worked out and it worked out pretty well they continued to push back the Philistines right out of their land and there is peace in the land Samuel spends the rest of his life travelling on a circuit round the country acting as judge mediating in disputes resolving conflicts but also presumably continuing to speak the word of the

Lord to these people to remind them and encourage them and we are called to do likewise to go on in faith and live for him as the verse that was given to me at my baptismal service says live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way but that doesn't mean there won't be further failures anyone who believes the Christian life can be lived without failure is either a very new Christian totally deluded or probably more likely living in denial of the reality that they experience every day in fact in reading up on it I discovered that song that we sang at the beginning there are versions where they've carefully edited out all references to being prone to wander as being inappropriate but just seven verses into chapter 8

[33 : 07] God is saying to Samuel they have rejected me but we're called to once again return to God to come to him in confession and repentance and go out in faith and keep doing that until that glorious day when faith becomes sight when our sin becomes history when we are changed into the likeness of our glorious redeemer in our final hymn we're going to be singing of many of those truths as we think about what we were of how God showed us our sin and called us to him of how we can trust in him as we look forward to another week into the future to the unknown with everything that that brings because we'll be singing to his grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved how precious did that grace appear the hour

I first believed through many dangers toils and snares I have already come to his grace that brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home Amen in only works in another way to do things I believe every day I have I believe that I can't stay proteas YouTube Try to higher Life■UND into cases