

BaptistWay Press® Premium Commentary

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Studies in Character and the Crown (1 Samuel)

Lesson Three

Repentance, Deliverance, Remembrance

Focal Text

1 Samuel 7

Background

1 Samuel 4-7

Main Idea

Samuel led the nation of Israel to a renewal in their relationship with God.

Question to Explore

Are you in need of renewal in your relationship with God?

Quick Read

Samuel led the Hebrews in repenting of their sin, deliverance from the Philistines, and in remembering God as their helper. God always welcomes us when we come with repentant hearts.

Introduction

Many of our clichés and proverbial expressions reflect our fascination with chickens. “We have to walk on eggshells” denotes that we must be extremely careful about what we say to someone. When someone is experiencing the consequences of poor decision making, we say “the chickens have come home to roost.” When someone refuses to face a new challenge due to fear, we assert that “he has chickened out.” We describe a new meat dish with the phrase “tastes like chicken.” When someone leaves suddenly, we declare, “she flew the coop.” We playfully warn of punishment to be exerted with “I am going to wring your neck.” (I have seen my Dad do it—to a chicken, not to me.)

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Then we are quite aware of these two questions:

- Why did the chicken cross the road?
- Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

We would agree that both confession of sins and repentance from them are necessary components of the decision to give one's life to Jesus and receive the gift of eternal life or to renew that faith commitment. In this process, which comes first, confession or repentance? Does confession precede repentance? Does repentance precede confession? Do they occur simultaneously? 1 Samuel 7 will instruct us as to how these two components expressed by the Israelites resulted in their salvation or deliverance by God.

Commentary

The prominent leader Samuel does not appear at all in 1 Samuel 4-6. These chapters (along with 2 Samuel 6) present a unified narrative. This narrative provides a history of the ark of the covenant from the time before Israel had a king until the time that David brought it into the city of Jerusalem.

The ark was a small rectangular box or chest made of acacia wood overlaid with gold. The lid for the box was of beaten, pure gold. It included two angelic beings (cherubim) that looked toward each other and down toward the lid. It was the most important piece of furniture in the tabernacle, and the only one that was positioned in the most sacred room, the Most Holy Place (Exodus 25:10-22). To the Israelites, the ark was a physical object that represented the presence of God, because above the lid of the ark was the place where God himself dwelled and met with Moses.

The Israelites believed the ark of the covenant (which represented the presence of God) would assure them a military victory over the Philistines. As a result, they brought it to the field of battle, and the Philistines captured it (1 Sam. 4:1-11). God carried out his declared judgment of Eli and his family (4:12-22). The ark created chaos for the Philistine gods and physical misery for the Philistines (5:1-12). After seven months they sent the ark back to Israel, specifically to the village of Beth Shemesh (6:1-18). It was then relocated to Kiriath-Jearim (6:19-21).

Returning the Ark to Israel (7:1-2)

The Philistines carefully orchestrated the return of the ark of the covenant to Israel. The people of Beth Shemesh secured it in Israelite hands again (6:13-18). Some of these persons violated the holiness of the ark in some way by disrespecting it and received the judgment of God. The leaders of Beth Shemesh no longer wanted to be in possession of the ark and made their desire known (6:20-21).

The elders of Kiriath-Jearim went to Beth Shemesh and transported the ark to their village (7:1). Kiriath-Jearim (City of the Forests) was located near the border of Saul's tribe (Benjamin) and David's tribe (Judah), some eight miles northwest of Jerusalem.

Abinadab's house must have been a local religious shrine or holy place. Abinadab and Eleazar are both names associated with priestly families. The elders respected the mystery of the ark and "consecrated" Eleazar or officially set him apart, probably through some ritual, for this special assignment of priestly service (7:1).

His assignment was "to guard the ark of the LORD" (7:1). This assignment may have included two components. Possibly Eleazar protected the ark from being used again in a careless or superstitious way that previously caused it to be captured by the enemy of Israel. He probably also had the task of protecting others from violating the sanctity of the ark and suffering the severe consequences of God's punishment.

The second verse is a summarizing one declaring that the ark remained at Kiriath-Jearim for twenty years. This means that the ark remained in this village throughout the remainder of 1 Samuel (the entire reign of King Saul). Early in his reign David retrieved the ark from the house of Abinadab (2 Sam. 6:3) and relocated it in his newly captured city of Jerusalem.

The narrator asserted that following the return of the ark to Israel, the people "mourned and sought after the LORD" (7:2). This is an unusual phrase denoting that they felt some sorrow over recent events and looked to Yahweh to relieve their sadness. Sometimes people seem to think that being sorry for your sins is all God wants or expects from us. That is not true. Being sorry for one's sins or regretting sinful behavior can lead one to repentance but certainly is not the same as repentance from sins.

This was a change in attitude from the confidence with which they took the ark of God to the battlefield (1 Sam. 4). Then they seemed to have the notion that they could control the power of God via the physical object that represented his presence among them. Now they had a better appreciation for the awe-inspiring and mysterious presence of God. They had learned an important lesson.

Returning to God (7:3-6)

The ark of the covenant was a physical object that represented the presence of God. Samuel was a person who also represented God to the Israelites. The people of Israel sought the Lord by going to Samuel for guidance. The people wanted to seek God, and Samuel gave them instructions about how to do that appropriately.

Samuel's initial response to the people may suggest that he questioned their sincerity. He gave them directions to follow only "IF" (7:3; emphasis mine) they were genuinely returning to God with a complete or wholehearted desire to seek him. "Returning" is the word *shub*, a verb which occurs over 1,000 times in the Old Testament. It was used

literally for “turning around” or “moving in a different direction” and used theologically for “a turning away from sin and a turning to God.”

Samuel announced some conditions to be met. This would prove the authenticity of the Israelites’ repentance. Of the four conditions, two were negative (turn away from), while two were positive (turn toward God) in nature. They were to renounce any allegiance to all other gods by getting rid of whatever idols of these gods might be in their possession. “Ashtoreths” (7:3) referred to Astarte/Ishtar, the greatest of the goddesses. This form of her name added the concept of “shame” in a derogatory way.

On the positive side, Samuel demanded a newly made decision to renew their commitment. This decisive re-commitment to God would be demonstrated through exclusive service and worship offered in God’s name.

The Israelites complied with these demands. In this compliance statement, only two of the four conditions are mentioned, one from each category (negative and positive). Baal was the greatest of the Canaanite gods. He was the god of rain and the winter storm; thus, he was a fertility god, the bringer of the prosperity of flock and field. The plural form “Baals” (7:4) recognizes the many local forms and shrines devoted to the worship of this god. Ashtoreth was Baal’s wife/consort.

Samuel ordered the gathering of the people at Mizpah (7:5). Although we see the phrase “all Israel” (7:5), it is impossible to know whether persons from all twelve tribes responded to this order. Mizpah, (watch tower, outlook) was a village in the tribal area of Benjamin, some eight miles north of Jerusalem. The people of Israel had gathered there before (Judges 20-21).

Samuel’s willingness to “intercede” (1 Sam. 7:5) with Yahweh in behalf of the people signified his role as a prophet (also 12:19, 23). Intercession or pleading the people’s case with God was a dimension of the ministry to which a prophet was called.

The people again complied with Samuel’s instructions and gathered at Mizpah. This ritual of pouring out water is not attested anywhere else in the Old Testament. Since it is associated with other religious practices, fasting and confession, it undoubtedly embodied some symbolic significance. It probably signified the washing away of sin and guilt. Samuel’s leadership here is that of a priest, guiding religious practices.

In this instance repentance or turning from sin (7:3-4) clearly preceded the confession of sins (7:6). Is that the necessary or proper order? Is it possible to turn away from sinful actions that have not yet been acknowledged to God and confessed? On the other hand, is it possible to confess sins to God with a view to forgiveness without expressing the intense desire to turn away from those sins and follow God obediently? I do know this. Neither repentance nor confession without the other has the power to access God’s salvation.

“Leader” (7:6) stresses another dimension of Samuel’s leadership role. It is the same word used to describe the other leaders in Israel between Joshua and Samuel. The “judges” who led Israel during the “period of the Judges” were leaders who sometimes delivered the Israelites militarily from oppressors.

God’s Deliverance (7:7-11)

It happens too often to be circumstantial. Whenever a Jesus-follower experiences a time of spiritual renewal, he/she seems to face immediately a situation in which that renewed commitment is tested. The situation the Israelites faced was a new aggression against them by the Philistines. How would the people of God respond?

It seems likely the Philistines misunderstood the basis for the gathering of the Israelites at Mizpah. The Israelites had gathered at Mizpah before for mobilizing an army to do battle against one of their own tribes (Judg. 20:1-3). The Philistines speculated that the Israelites had gathered again at Mizpah to mobilize for an attack upon them. They, therefore, determined to be proactive (1 Sam. 7:7).

The Israelites were afraid. Previously, when they were discouraged and filled with fear due to the aggression of the Philistines, they superstitiously took the ark to the battlefield, thinking that its very presence would save them from defeat (4:1-3). Here, after their time of repentance and confession, they responded differently to their fears. They deployed the words of the Psalmist who said to God, “When I am afraid, I will trust in you” (Psalm 56:3). Instead of looking to the object that represented God, they went to Samuel, the person who represented God to them (1 Sam. 7:8).

They begged Samuel to help them. “Do not stop” (7:8) denotes being silent or sometimes being deaf as in “don’t turn a deaf ear to us.” It may signify two things here. They did not want Samuel to withdraw from them by keeping silent. Also, they did not want Samuel to fail in crying out to God in their behalf.

“Crying out to the LORD our God” (7:8) is the language of prayers and petitions offered to God by one in need of God’s help. “Deliver” (7:8) translates the Hebrew verb, *yasha*. They used that verb with a wide semantic range. It referred to God’s deliverance from trouble, provision of victory over an enemy, or to salvation from sins.

The “cry out—save” tandem is a foundational characteristic of Israel’s faith. They cried out to God so that God would hear their cry and rescue or save them (Exod. 2:23; 3:7-8). The cries to God acknowledged the lack of resources to do what God alone could do. It expressed a reliance upon God or a trust in him to save. All true prayer is at its core, this kind of petition. They now believed what Samuel had said to them about God’s deliverance (1 Sam. 7:3).

This “cry out—save” norm for relationship with God can be distorted in several ways. One can distort this continuum by believing that one is self-sufficient with no need for

God; by believing that prayer is futile or not productive; or by believing that God is not attentive to our needs or does not care for us.

The Israelites had complied with Samuel's instructions. Now Samuel complied with the people's instructions. He cried out in prayer to God for the people (7:9). The sincerity of the intercession was demonstrated by the offering of a sacrifice. A "whole burnt offering" (7:9) denoted a complete reliance on God to save. The sacrificial animal was quite young, although it had to be at least one-week-old, the minimum age required under the law (Leviticus 22:27).

Samuel cried out to God in Israel's behalf, and God responded to his prayer. He acted to save or deliver them from the Philistines. On this occasion, the response of God was immediate. In fact, he began his work even before the sacrifice was totally consumed or burned up (1 Sam. 7:10). We rejoice that God responded immediately, but we should not have the expectation that he always responds to our prayers that quickly.

The Bible frequently utilizes thunder to describe the presence and action of God (Exod. 20:18-19; 1 Sam. 2:10; 2 Sam. 22:14; Ps. 29:3). In fact, the Hebrew word for "thunder" (1 Sam. 7:10) is sometimes translated as the "voice" of God. The narrator utilized the language of Holy War in describing God's action. This was when God fought in behalf of his people and created panic or confusion among the enemy (Exod. 14:24; Joshua 10:10;).

God's work created a chaotic disorganization among the Philistines. The Israelites did the "mop up" work. "Beth Car" (1 Sam. 7:11) had to be located west of Mizpah on the route toward the Philistine cities.

In 1 Samuel 7 we see the elements of the cyclical pattern found in the Book of Judges (Judg. 2:11-23). This repetitive cycle included four components:

- Israel sinned against God. (2:11-13)
- God punished utilizing another ethnic to rule over them. (2:14-15)
- Israel cried out to God to save or deliver them. (2:18b)
- God saved his people through a judge or deliverer. (2:16)

Remembering God's Deliverance (7:12-17)

Samuel set up a large stone at the very spot where Yahweh had provided this great victory. This was the traditional way of marking the spot where a significant event occurred (Gen. 28:18; Josh. 24:26-27). These standing stones were usually described as a pillar (*masseba*) rather than a stone (*eben*) as here. "Ebenezer" (1 Sam. 7:12) means "a stone of help," for Yahweh had helped them to defeat the Philistines. (Psalm 46:1 uses this word to undergird the confidence of God's help.)

Evidently this was the place where the Israelites had previously gathered to fight the Philistines (1 Sam. 4:1), although at that time, it did not yet have this name. The narrator confirms that the damage done then had been fully repaired. The phrase “thus far” (7:12) could either be a chronological or geographical marker. It could either mean that Yahweh helped them up till now (time) or on this spot (space).

The text presents Samuel as another one of the judge figures who led Israel in the days before the monarchy was established. God used the judges as military leaders to deliver the Israelites from the oppression or domination of other groups. In the same way, God used Samuel with the subjugation of the Philistines (7:13-14).

These statements about the total domination of the Philistines are a bit exaggerated or overstated in an idealized way. This enemy did continue to be a source of anxiety and tension for God’s people (1 Sam. 13-14, 16-18). The Philistines were governed by the rulers of their five chief cities. These were Ashdod, Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron (1 Sam. 6:17). The two cities that are noted here were the ones located closest to territory Israel controlled.

“Amorites” (7:14) was an ethnic term that described generally the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan. Together the Philistines and the Amorites represented the enemies both outside and inside of their land. Israel was free from external and internal threats to their peace.

The judges were not only military-deliverer leaders. They were also persons who administered justice and resolved disputes among the tribes of Israel (Judg. 10:1-5; 12:7-15). In the same way, Samuel was one who dispensed justice. The circuitous route that he regularly traveled is quite a small one (1 Sam. 7:16). It was a small fraction of the entire land, but it did include the “heart” of Israelite territory.

Building an altar (7:17) is an act of worship. That is the work of a priest. The diversity of Samuel’s ministry is amazing. He functioned as a *prophet* by delivering God’s word to Israel and interceding for them in prayer. He functioned as a *judge* by delivering them from their enemies and by dispensing justice among them. He functioned as a *priest* by building altars and offering sacrifices. Where did Samuel access the resources from God to minister in such a comprehensive way?

“But he always went back to Ramah” (7:17). This might mean more than a simple statement declaring that when Samuel started on one of his “traveling judge” trips, he always completed it successfully. Was going back home to Ramah his way of remembering the simple piety of his home environment created by his parents? Was it a centering place for him, a place for a renewal of his spiritual power to do all the ministry God had called him to do? It is important for each of us to have a place like that, a place to which we frequently return to re-evaluate our values and re-commit to our tasks.

Conclusion

Which comes first, confession or repentance? Must we identify our sins and confess them to God before we can turn away from them? Or, must we commit to turning away from our sins before we confess them to him? Maybe they are so inseparably enmeshed as spiritual necessity, that we cannot distinguish one from the other as to sequence and chronology.

I am certain of this truth, however. I know that neither confession nor repentance can ever be experienced without the work of the Spirit of God. What comes first? The conviction of the Holy Spirit precedes and initiates the desire to repent and confess our sinful rebellion to God.

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