

## 1 SAMUEL 7:5-17

### INTRODUCTION

Last time we discovered that after 20 years of the ark being present at Kiriath Jearim God began to work and the people of Israel began to mourn because of their sin and they began to seek after God (v 2). Samuel sensing the change of mood tells the people of Israel what is involved in repentance, Samuel wants to make sure that this is genuine so he teaches the people and us what true repentance is all about (v 3).

We learnt that it must be done with all our hearts and we must remove the idolatrous gods from among us and commit ourselves exclusively to the Lord for He alone is to be served and worshipped. Samuel promises the Lord's deliverance from the hands of the Philistines as a result of repentance and the good news is that the Israelites put away their false gods and worshipped the Lord only (v 4).

Now in the verses that we are studying we see that personal repentance can lead to national repentance taking place and this is demonstrated in these verses through a public ceremony led by Samuel. We could say that what we have here is a national revival of the people of God, which is demonstrated in a national ceremony of repentance and commitment.

### 1. THE LIFE CHANGING EVENTS AT MIZPAH (vs. 5-17)

Samuel sensing this mood for repentance called upon Israel to assemble at Mizpah. Mizpah was 8 miles north of Jerusalem and it hosted other national gatherings for consultation etc (Judges 20:1; 21:8) so it was a historical meeting place and therefore a suitable place for national repentance. The reason why they are gathering is so that Samuel as priest could intercede for the people (v 5).

Now when the people gathered together they poured water out before the Lord, fasted and confessed their sin before the Lord (v 6). It is not known exactly what this water ceremony was symbolising; but it could be that it symbolised the washing away of sin as the people recognised their sin was against the Lord.

It could be that it was symbolising the pouring out of their lives before God in a fresh commitment, just as water once poured out could not be gathered up again so they were saying that we are pouring out our lives before the Lord never to take up the old way of sin and rebellion again. The point that we are to learn here is that genuine repentance recognises sin as being against God (v 6).

Therefore although other people might be involved, and we might sin against them ultimately all sin is against God and therefore it must be dealt with.

We all need to learn this truth, for so often we think that sin is only against people, and therefore we can give the impression that it is not as serious. If we only view sin in this way we will always find reasons why we reacted or acted in the way we did. We will always be able to find a reason to excuse our sin.

But there is never an excuse for sin, for all sin is against God and He is never guilty of sin or of pushing us into it. Therefore when we sin let us first of all confess it to God and if need be confess it to the one we have sinned against.

Likewise when we are genuinely repentant we will have a desire in our hearts to make a new commitment to God, a new determination not to allow sin a foothold, we will have fresh desires not to go back to our old ways of sin and rebellion but to stay true to the Lord.

But will repentance make any difference to the nation for if you remember the Israelites had been defeated by the Philistines (chapter 4) and the Philistine military threat was still as strong as before and when they hear about what is going on at Mizpah they decide to attack the Israelites, and this brought great fear upon the people (v 7).

But the difference this time is that the Israelites are seeking God's help, which is demonstrated in their reliance on Samuel to pray for them and to offer the appropriate sacrifices (vs. 8-9). If they are going to win the battle and gain the victory it is because someone else is praying for them in this case Samuel. It is a wonderful picture of Jesus Christ who is our High priest who intercedes for us (Romans 8:34).

His prayers are always answered for He prays according to the will of his Father. We have to face many spiritual battles as Christians no more so than with the battle of sin, which is constantly crouching at the door of our life waiting to pounce. How are we going to resist the very strong temptations to give in to sin? Where are we going to get the power to say no when our own nature is so weak and so prone to saying yes to sin?

The answer is that we must rely upon God in the knowledge that His Son Jesus Christ died for us and is now actively praying for us in the midst of our spiritual battles. However the only reason why prayer is possible, why mere sinners like Samuel are able to approach God is because of the sacrifice that was made.

In the Old Testament it is the animal sacrifice (v 10) but for us it is because of the sacrifice of Jesus that we are able to approach God and pray to God through Jesus who himself is interceding for us. Prayer would be impossible if it were not for the fact that Jesus died in order to deal with sin for God does not listen to those who have sin in their hearts, therefore sin must be dealt with and that is what Jesus has done for us.

But we must be careful that we do not simply take this privilege of prayer for granted, we ought to daily search our hearts and confess our sins and seek his grace in forgiveness so that we can approach his throne with great boldness.

Now the result is that the Lord answered Samuel's prayer and the Philistines were routed thanks to the intervention of God (which may have been in the form of a thunder storm vs. 10-11). This was a great victory thanks to the Lord's intervention it is something that must not be forgotten about and so Samuel sets up a stone and called it "Ebenezer" which literally means "stone of help." It was a memorial stone for it commemorates the place where God helped Israel.

The Israelites frequently erected monuments sometimes they marked places of worship (Genesis 8:20) but this stone was a commemorative stone it was a stone that acknowledged God's mighty saving act and it was a symbol of a turning point in the life of the nation. This stone symbolises a new act on God's part, which meant that the worshipper would never be the same again.

It was a permanent reminder that at this place and at this point of time God acted in such a way that the future has new hope.

Jacob did something similar for he set up a stone at Bethel to acknowledge that God had met him and his life would be different as a result (Genesis 28:16-22). Joshua used 12 stones to mark the place where God led the people across the Jordan River on dry ground (Joshua 4:1-9) an event that meant that things would be different for the nation and the stones would remind future generations of the Lord's dealings with his people (Joshua 4:23).

Thus Samuel is continuing an old tradition of marking the place where God had touched people in a significant way. This stone will help future generations to remember the time when God helped

Israel defeat the Philistines but it would also be a reminder to the present generation that their victory was not a result of their own strength or brilliant military strategy but because the Lord intervened and gave them the victory.

The stone is a constant reminder of Israel's need for the Lord's help and intervention it is a reminder that if the Lord has helped them thus far then they continually need and can depend on his help in the future days along as they deal with sin within their hearts.

Now even in our own nation we have monuments to remind us of a significant event. There is a monument in Leyburn to remind us of those who gave their lives in world wars in order to protect our freedom. Every year on 11 November people gather around that monument in order to remember those wars and all who have fallen in them.

The reason we have such monuments is that we need aids to remember significant events in our nation and they help future generations to learn about what has happened in our nation in the past. Although the various monuments within our nation are important reminders to us they are not as meaningful as this "Ebenezer" monument. This Ebenezer stood as a reminder to the people of God of what God has done for his people.

They were not deserving of the Lord's intervention and help, they did not deserve to be saved from the hands of the Philistines or to defeat them but because of the Lord's help they now enjoy the fruit of that victory.

But remember their victory came as a result of their repentance and their trust in their God, this monument reminds them that repentance and faith towards God brought them victory; they received the benefits of the victory because they repented and trusted in God.

Now we will have a number of Ebenezer's in our lives perhaps they are places or people who remind us of God's grace. Personally it might be the place where we first experienced God's grace when He enabled us to repent and believe. It might be a church building or a particular home or town but every time you see it, it reminds you of that significant event when we trusted Christ and as a result we have never been the same again.

It could be that we had a real crisis in our lives at some point and the Lord very graciously came to us and met us at the point of need and we have been changed people ever since and so we are reminded of God's grace at that time whenever we see our Ebenezer.

It could be a verse of Scripture that God burned upon our hearts so that He changed us dramatically as a result. Every time we read that verse today it reminds us of God's work in our hearts and that verse has become to us our Ebenezer a reminder to us of how the Lord has helped us so far and all our Ebenezer's are an encouragement to us for the future; for the fact that God has helped us so far is a promise that He will continue to do so in the future.

But just as we have personal Ebenezer's we also have some as a church. Every October we have a thank offering in this church, it is on the Sunday close to the date when this church came into being as a church. Every year we think about God's faithfulness to us; how the Lord has helped us so far and those of you who are founder members no doubt recall that day when this church was constituted as a church and the result is that things have never been the same since. It is good to look back and remember how the Lord has helped us in this church. Every March I think about how the Lord has helped me personally in calling me to the ministry of his word in this place. That is an expression of how the Lord has helped us so far.

Likewise every April I am reminded of the events that led to us buying this building, which means that things have now changed since we once met in rented accommodation. But the good thing

about having certain Ebenezer's is that it reminds us of the future as well. The fact that God has helped us so far as a church and has been gracious to us is in fact an encouragement that the Lord will continue to help us in the future.

Therefore we need to constantly be reminded that we are not to look to ourselves or to look to the pastor or to anyone else but we must all look to the Lord for his daily help and grace to sustain his work here in Wensleydale. There is no reason for us to think that the Lord will not help us; He has helped us so far and therefore we must continue to look to him in prayer and rely upon his power to be at work by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We must seek to root out sin and confess it to God while constantly trusting in him alone for help.

But there is another Ebenezer that the church has and the Lord Jesus himself has given it to us. It is the Ebenezer of the Lord's Supper, which reminds us of what the Lord has done for us in Christ and how He has changed our lives and has been with us so far.

The Lord knew how prone we are to forget so He gave us the Supper to remind us of that great life-changing event of Jesus' death and resurrection and to remind us of how our lives have been changed through Christ.

Every time we partake of the Lord's Supper we are acknowledging our need of Christ and it gives us a fresh opportunity to think of how He has changed us by his grace because of what Christ did for us in dying for our sin and in rising for our justification.

Now the chapter ends with a brief summary of the rest of Samuel's ministry. He was based in Ramah and he travelled around Israel and served as Judge for the people (vs. 15-17). That involved constantly bringing God's word to the people and seeking to make decisions according to the principles given in his word. It is a reminder to us as we close that after this great and dramatic revival within Israel, Samuel continued his ministry of bringing God's word upon the people. Why? Because God's people constantly need the ministry of God's word for it rebukes sin, corrects behaviour and trains us in holiness.

Likewise in the church today after we experience our Ebenezer we cannot rely on that experience or those experiences alone to keep us going, we must constantly depend on God's word as it is given to us in the Bible. We don't need a prophet to bring God's word to us for we can read, study it and think about it ourselves and by the power of the Holy Spirit we can be challenged and changed by it.

However at the same time God has given the church the gift of Pastors whose task it is to help the church to understand and apply God's word in our lives. We all need to hear, read and heed God's word so that we will not fall into sin but will steadfastly grow in our faith using our Ebenezer's to remind us of the Lord's help in the past and to encourage us to trust him for the future.

May God help us to do so?

Amen