

## True Repentance Delivers – I Samuel 7

I Samuel 7 is a pivotal transition in the life of the Israelites. Robert Alter in his translation and commentary, *The David Story*, notes, “This chapter, which offers a summary account of Israel’s religious reformation and military ascendancy under Samuel’s rule, serves as a bridge between the Ark narrative and the great narrative of the founding of the monarchy.” (Alter, Robert, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*, pg. 36) So, what we are seeing in this chapter is a transition or reformation from what has been happening in the nation. The defeat and correction of God is about to turn in a different direction.

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 Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.” <sup>4</sup> So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and they served the LORD only.

<sup>5</sup> Then Samuel said, “Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you.” <sup>6</sup> So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the LORD and fasted on that day and said there, “We have sinned against the LORD.” And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah. <sup>7</sup> Now when the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines. <sup>8</sup> And the people of Israel said to Samuel, “Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us, that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines.” <sup>9</sup> So Samuel took a nursing lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. And Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> And the men of Israel went out from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them, as far as below Beth-car.

<sup>12</sup> 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.” <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. <sup>16</sup> And he went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah. And he judged Israel in all these places. <sup>17</sup> Then he would return to Ramah, for his home was there, and there also he judged Israel. And he built there an altar to the LORD. I Samuel 7:3-17

The first thing we notice is that Samuel has returned to the text. He is now becoming the leader of the nation. Remember back in verse 2 after all that happened with the Ark, the people lamented after Yahweh, they longed for the return of his presence. So, in verse 3 Samuel preaches repentance to the people. James Dixon in his commentary notes, "You can rest assured that Samuel spent those 20 years preaching to Israel that a military victory was not the most important thing, but that faith in the God of their fathers was of most importance."

What do we notice about Samuel's message? It is not a superficial call to repentance, it's a true call that requires action on the part of the people. Most of us are familiar to some degree with religious experiences that are only surface-level and do not actually produce change. But the reality is, that is not what any of us want. The prophet wanted to make sure the people were sincere especially after the Ark episodes where the people attempted to manipulate God's presence. Samuel tells the people if you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then you will get rid of your idols.

I want to take a minute here and explain the foreign gods. In the text the plural form is used for Baal and Ashtaroth, which could mean several gods are indicated. Let's discuss who these gods were for clarification. Asherah or the plural Asherim was a pagan goddess known as "Lady of the Sea". She was a chief goddess of Tyre in the 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C. This goddess is mentioned in I Kings 15:13 and 2 Kings 21:7. Her prophets are mentioned when Elijah confronts Ahab in I Kings 18, and the vessels used for her worship are mentioned during King Josiah's reforms in 2 Kings 23. The goddess represented grace, sex appeal, and fertility, and ironically was called, "the Holiness" or "The Holy One".

Ashtoreth or Astarte was a Canaanite goddess who was identified with the planet Venus. The Babylonian name for this goddess was Ishtar, and she was a goddess of love, maternity, and fertility. Both Asherah and Ashtoreth were goddesses of war and sex. Ashtoreth worship is mentioned in I Kings 11:5,33 and 2 Kings 23:13 in reference to Solomon. She is also mentioned in Judges 2:13 and 10:6. Both of these goddesses were obviously female.

But Baal was the chief male deity of the Canaanites. Baal in the ancient religious literature is known as the son of El, who was the father of the Canaanite gods. And get this, he is also considered the son of Dagon. Baal was a god of agriculture and was

worshipped to increase crops, fields, and flocks. The worship of Baal included animal sacrifice, sacred meals, and licentious dancing. In addition, the high places of worship included chambers for prostitution by male and female prostitutes.

Now, I am giving you all of this background so you know what the text is really talking about. So you understand how awful and dangerous the worship of these gods were to the Israelites. And how antithetical the worship of these gods were in comparison to the worship of Yahweh. There was no way to mix the two, and it hardly seems plausible to think the corrupt worship practices of the Canaanite gods could ever be mixed with the worship of the true God, Yahweh.

Moving back to the text of I Samuel 7, the prophet tells the people if they will only serve the Lord, the true God, then they will be delivered from the Philistines. The text goes on to tell us the people removed all the idols, and after the people did this Samuel called an assembly at Mizpah. Now, I want to pause here a moment. I do not believe in general the Christian life is formulaic. It is a relationship with Jesus. However, the Bible does give us principles for victory. And here is a simple formula or principle for victory out of bondage. Repent, leave your idols behind, worship God with all your heart and someone had better be praying! This equals in the text and in the kingdom victory. If you need victory in your life, there is the answer. But it is also the answer for the church and the nation as well. Now, there is also one other element and we will get to that.

Let's talk about Mizpah. This city was about 7 miles north of Jerusalem. We first find this name mentioned in Genesis 31 when Jacob made a heap of stones as a witness of the covenant between himself and Laban. They named the stones Mizpah, which means watchtower. So, in I Samuel, the prophet chose this city, Mizpah, for a solemn assembly, to pray for the people. Now, there is more to this story, but I want to stop here and think about Moses for a moment. Let's read Exodus 33:7-11

Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. <sup>8</sup> Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. <sup>9</sup> When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. <sup>10</sup> And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door.

<sup>11</sup> Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent.

We notice this tent of meeting was for the people to meet with the Lord. It was not just for Moses – the people who wanted to seek the Lord would go out to this tent and meet with God. And really what we are seeing here in I Samuel 7 and in Exodus 33 are the elements of prayer that bring us close to God. The revival of I Samuel 7 does not look like what we might think of, but I assure you it is certainly a revival. The people and priests had rebelled, but now they are coming back to the Lord. They realized their error and now it was time for repentance and fervent prayer.

The text tells us that Israel gathered at Mizpah. So, this is essentially a national gathering of prayer and repentance. The text tells us the people drew water and poured it out before the Lord. This seems unusual but it is part of the repentance or purification process.

Dale Ralph Davis makes a very interesting comparison of I Samuel chapters 4 and 7. In chapter 4 Israel is struck down by the Philistines, but in chapter 7 the Philistines are struck down by Israel. In chapter 4 the Israelites try to manipulate and use the Ark for their own purposes. But in chapter 7 we have repentance, prayer, and the people are seeking Samuel's help. The result in chapter 4 is a total defeat of Israel, the Ark is taken and we get Ichabod, which means the glory has departed. But in chapter 7 we are going to see that idol demolition, prayer and repentance provide a much different result.

Revival isn't here yet, but it is coming! Mark this, the deliverance that is coming is not produced by some superior intelligence or strategic planning. Dale Ralph Davis notes, "Sometimes the Father may box us in, place us in a situation in which, one by one, all our secondary helps and supports are taken from us, in order that, defenseless, we may lean on his mercy alone. More and more God's people must walk the way of desperation – prayer." (Davis, Dale Ralph, *I Samuel: Looking on the Heart*, pg. 76)

So, let's move on and see what happens as Samuel becomes prophet and judge to the people. The first thing that happens is the Philistines realize the Israelites are gathered at Mizpah and what do they think? They apparently think Israel is gathering herself for war. So, the Philistines come against Israel to put down any thoughts of rebellion. And often this is the case, as soon as you decide to do the right thing, here comes the enemy. The Israelites put away their idols, repent and accept Samuel as their leader. And here comes the enemy. And naturally in the story when the people of God realize the Philistines are coming, they are understandably afraid. But what do they do? They tell Samuel, "Do not stop crying out for us to the Lord our God, so that he will save us out of the hand of the Philistines." And we are beginning to see what it looks like when God's people repent and believe God. Samuel had told them if they repented and turned to God with all their hearts, that he would deliver them. Well, guess what? They believed the prophet! The Israelites ask Samuel again to pray and they believe God will save them.

Listen, this is not some military tactic, the people believe what the prophet told them. They believe God will save them when they do things his way. This is how we get victory and how revival starts - repentance, prayer, and belief. Do you really think it is that simple? Yes, it is simple, but it isn't easy. It takes action, turning from idols, worshipping God with all our hearts, repenting, prayer, and believing God will do what he says!

So, what does the prophet do? He prepares and offers a sacrifice to the Lord, then he cries out on behalf of the nation. He intercedes like they are in a crisis because they are. Crying out to God is emotional, it is passionate, it is desperation for God to act. Now, before moving on, I want to stop here a moment. If we really thought our nation could change, and we thought we could do something about it, what would the answer be? The answer would be what we find in this chapter - turning away from idols, repentance, prayer, and the belief that God can and will save us. Now, I really think to start the process we need to deal with what is the root of the problem - idols. How do we in our culture truly return to God and put away our idols? Back in the Old Testament, this was very overt, but at the same time it was a heart issue. Most of us don't have little statues that we worship, but what do we worship? Money, power, influence, celebrities, media, high-profile leaders, and the list could go on. And let me go a step further, remember when we talked about Ashareth, and Baal, and how sick the worship was to those idols. Well, think of it this way. What if I said, it is ok to go out on Saturday night, drinking, partying, doing drugs, and having a one-night stand, and then come to church and worship God like everything is normal and nothing happened the night before. Would you think that was ok. No, of course not. We have a lot of perversion in our culture today, whether it is gender confusion, sexual exploitation, gay marriage, or subverting the rule of law. There are people who will tell you or imply by their lifestyle, that you can do all of that and still be close to God, still worship him like all is well. Oh my, how wrong this is. You see, this is a real problem. I don't think we understand exactly who we are worshipping. God is holy, he is a consuming fire, we should fear him. Is living in perverted sin acting in reverence and fear of God? Can we mix these lifestyles with the true worship of a holy God? No, no, no, you cannot mix them. Life in pursuit of God is never about mixing the worldly with the godly. It is always about Jesus and who he is, it is not about us. Either we put cultural idols down and forsake them or we don't. There really is no middle ground with God. The Israelites were mixing pagan rituals and practices that are an abomination with worshipping Yahweh. The prophet tells them, you can't do that! You must leave all the pagan idols and their worship, and return to God.

So, what does that communicate to us? What do we need to leave behind? Certainly perverted lifestyles, but for some of us it might be more subtle, it might be social media, it might be friends we don't need, it might be money or power or influence. We

must ask ourselves, whose are we? Do we belong to God or the culture? Will we worship cultural gods or the real God, who is holy and righteous. The prophet tells the people if they will leave their idols and return to God, then he will deliver them from the Philistines. I promise you that if Christians would whole-heartedly leave their sick idols behind and worship God, then things would change, revival would come. In the story, the Israelites knew they had sinned – the ark was taken, they were defeated by the Philistines. I wonder if we are aware of our own sin, our idolatry. I don't think we are. Some of our consciences have been seared by too much unhealthy media. We have forgotten what it is like to just sit and be still before a holy God. We are always rushing to the next activity, seeing what we can mix and get for ourselves. All the while God waits for his people to repent and return to him. How do we change our idol-filled lifestyles? We must decide it is actually needed, that it is necessary, and then take action. It requires an intense focus upon God.

Moving back to the text in verse 9 we have a very important phrase. After Samuel prays, the text says, "the LORD answered him." In the original language the word used here is ana, which means to answer, respond, testify, speak or shout. Now, what happens next is nothing less than astounding. Remember, the Israelites repented, left their idols, called an assembly and the prophet prayed. And the most important part is that God answered Samuel.

So, the Philistines approached Israel in battle, but this time God answers with thunder and a loud roar. In other words, God answers with a storm. We might imagine a severe storm of thunder, lightning, and rain. This terrifies the Philistines. There are two words in the text for thunder or mighty sound. The first word is ra'am, which means to make the sound of thunder. The second word used is qol, which means voice or sound. So there is a lot going on here and the Philistines are thrown into confusion and panic, and thus the Israelites defeat them easily.

Now, I want to read verses 12-13 again because I think it reveals not only the significance of Samuel as the leader of God's people, but also the results of repentance.

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.

Now, I want you to realize that the process God's people are going through is long and a significant transition. God is eventually going to put David on the throne and restore true worship. But to do that, he has to change some things. First of all, God has to

remove the ungodly leadership of the priests. At first Samuel replaces them as the leader, but later on we will have the Zadok priests. This is required for God to restore his people and their worship. In this chapter in I Samuel, not only are the Philistines defeated but the text says God's hand was against them all the days of Samuel. Victory over the enemy requires us to whole-heartedly return to God, to repent and get rid of all of our idols. If we will do that, what will happen? We will get victory! But it is not just a single victory, it is a long-lasting victory. Our God is Big! If we keep reading the rest of the chapter, the text tells us the cities the Philistines had taken were restored to Israel. This was no small restoration – it was a nation-wide restoration. All that the enemy had taken was restored. What about us, has the enemy taken our cities? Well, guess what? God can restore them. But what does he require of us? To follow him with all of our hearts. God's plan is big and long-term. If we want to restore the church in our nation, we have to get serious about God. Many people think we need to get serious about solving all of the problems in our culture. They might say, we need credentialed people who can give us solutions. Well, I am here to tell you those people are already around. What we need is to get serious about God. We need city-wide, state-wide and nation-wide revival. And what does this chapter in I Samuel teach us about getting revival and restoration? It starts with repentance. It is a simple idea, but it is hard to do. We are enamored with media and worldly junk every day. That is not what we need. We need Jesus ruling and reigning in our hearts.

What is it going to take? Do you really want to see revival? Do you want to see our nation restored? Many people want that, but they put their faith in leaders. That is the wrong place. Put your faith in God, and in him alone.

So, what does this chapter teach us? It teaches us God can and will restore his people in great magnitude. But it also teaches we must take action – we must put away our idols, repent, pray, and believe that God will save us. That is the answer! God responds to true repentance.

Many of you have heard of Jonathan Edwards. He is known as being part of the First Great Awakening. In fact, his church experienced revival in 1734-35. A few years later the Great Awakening took hold. The famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" was preached in 1741. I want to quote from this sermon just to give you an idea of how much preaching has changed since then. But also to show that calling people to repentance may seem strange to us, but it is all through the Bible and in historical sermons. This is what Edwards said at the conclusion of this sermon.

And let everyone that is yet out of Christ, and hanging over the pit of hell, whether they be old men and women, or middle aged, or young people, or little children, now hearken to the loud calls of God's word and providence. This acceptable year of the

Lord, a day of such great favor to some, will doubtless be a day of remarkable vengeance to others. . . God seems now to be hastily gathering in his elect in all parts of the land; and probably the greater part of adult persons that ever shall be saved, will be brought in now in a little time, and that it will be as it was on the great out-pouring of the Spirit upon the Jews in the apostles' days; . . . Now undoubtedly it is, as it was in the days of John the Baptist, the axe is in an extraordinary manner laid at the root of the trees, that every tree which brings not forth good fruit, may be hewn down and cast into the fire.

Therefore, let everyone that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come. The wrath of Almighty God is now undoubtedly hanging over a great part of this congregation. Let everyone fly out of Sodom: "Haste and escape for your lives, look not behind you, escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed." (Edwards, Jonathan, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God", July 8, 1741).

How would you like to hear that sermon on Sunday? I wouldn't laugh, if God wills, it might bring revival and repentance, which we desperately need. Now, because the revival of Edward's church was published, Edwards became very well-known. However, in the 1740s Edwards also had great difficulty in his church. Unfortunately and sadly the people of the church voted Edwards out and he was removed from being their pastor after over 20 years of service. Edwards then served in a small church that included Indians. These years were difficult but Edwards produced many books. You can still get many of Edwards sermons and books today. I actually own a book that contains his sermons. One of his greatest works, *Freedom of the Will*, was produced during his time ministering to the Indians. Now, we might look at Edwards life and think, man he had a lot of difficulties, or we might say he experienced some of the greatest heights of spiritual fruitfulness. People today still read and study his works. Here is what I will say about Edwards. He was one part of a monumental move of God. The Great Awakening happened just before the American Revolution. Did this revival and awakening change the nation? Yes, it changed the spiritual landscape, but it also changed everything else. The Great Awakening not only brought spiritual freedom, it was the precursor to the freedom of our nation. God is not a small god. Spiritual renewal has many effects. When we decide to get serious about God, he will get serious about restoring our nation. What is required? We must repent, cast down our idols and worship God with all of our hearts, and believe he will deliver us. Repentance produces deliverance.

Do you really believe God can and will restore our nation? Then repent and watch God work miracles! True repentance delivers.