

Sermon 8: 1 Samuel 7:5-17: 'Ebenezer'

OUTLINE

Penitent prayer
Deliverance prayer
Answered prayer

INTRODUCTION

Living by faith and living by the flesh, these are the two themes of chapters 7 and 8. In chapter 7 we see Israel with a faithful judge and God blessing the nation with obedience as they follow the godly leadership of the judge; in the next chapter we have a dramatic contrast, Israel wants a king so that they can be 'like all the nations,' 8:5. Our attention is brought to God's goodness to Israel as they live by faith by the repeated mention of prayer. A life of faith is a life of prayer; it is a life of looking to God not man for relief. The life of flesh has its eye on man and seeks external conformity as a short cut to success and relief. The chapter before us has a summarizing feel to it, it portrays Samuel in the role of a faithful judge, the people of Israel as repentant and trusting and we see God fulfilling His covenant to bless Israel and protect her against her enemies. And the chapter ends with a number of observations about Samuel's rule as judge remarking on the success of this arrangement. We see the Philistines, although they would continue to be a thorn in the side, essentially subdued; we see real estate returned; and even peace with long-time enemies, v13-14. We are even given insights into his methods where he regularly preached God's word on a circuit and faithfully worshipped God, v15-17. Chapter 8 will rise up as a dramatic contrast. So today we have the opportunity of looking into Israel at their best, at a time when they are doing as they ought to do, when they make their spiritual problems their primary ones and their main strategies are repentance and prayer. We will see that it is this position before God that He blesses.

Penitent prayer

Verses 3 and 4 are a summary that v5-12 unpacks. V3-4 speaks of a message of repentance, and the response of repentance. But v5-12 unfolds the dramatic blow by blow account of what actually happened. In verse 5-6 we see a very co-operative people who come in obedience to Samuel's instruction to repent before the Lord, 'Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you." 6 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.' Their repentance was corporate, officially done with fasting and pouring out water; and most importantly with prayers of confession, 'We have sinned against the Lord.'

Let's begin by thinking about the word, 'we'. It is obvious that this a single, united collective confession by the nation of Israel. In the NT we have a similar confession of sin in the Lord's Prayer, 'Forgive US OUR trespasses as WE forgive those who trespass against US.' It appears that the Lord was moving by His Spirit and we are witnessing something similar to a revival. Revival is a movement of the Spirit upon the people to the effect that sinners and saints are deeply impressed by God's holiness and grace. There are times when we feel guilty but that sense of guilt can lift in a distracting moment, the deep sense of their sin seems to be gripping the Israelites, for when the Philistines do come to interrupt their national mourning, they are cast more deeply upon God not less. A true work of revival is evident in the Spirit granting a deep conviction of sin. David Brainerd was a missionary to

the red Indians in the 1700's, he gives the following account: "The power of God seemed to descend upon the assembly like a mighty, rushing wind, and with an astonishing energy bore down all before it. I stood amazed at the influence, which seized the audience almost universally; and could compare it to nothing more apt than the irresistible force of a mighty torrent or a swelling deluge that with it's insupportable weight and pressure bears down and sweeps before it whatever comes in it's way. Almost all persons of all ages were bowed down with concern together, and scarcely one was able to withstand the shock of this surprising operation; old men and women, who had been drunken wretches for many years and some little children, not more than six or seven years of age, appeared in distress for their souls, as well as persons of middle age.... They were almost universally praying and crying for mercy in every part of the house, and many out of doors, and numbers could neither go nor stand. Their concern was so great, each one for himself, that none seemed to take any notice of those about them, but each prayed freely for himself." (The Revival we need, O. J. Smith, p52-3).

How rare and precious a universal sense of sin is, and this is a central feature in this snapshot into one of Israel's 'good days.' When we ask you to pray for revival we are asking you to pray for God to grant us this universal sense of our sins and need for Christ. It will result in salvation for those who are not believers, and a deeper desire for holiness in the saints.

To come before the God of the bible and not with confession is to forget God and yourself. Confession of sin we see from the Lord's Prayer is to be a daily part of the Christian's life. The assumption in the Lord's Prayer is that we will sin and need to seek daily forgiveness. There is a difference between confessing our sins when we are first converted as we feel the full weight of our guilt and with our eternal destiny on the line; and when we are now children of God who sin. In the first instance we come not knowing His love and the certainty of His willingness to forgive, now we come knowing we are unchangeably children, that there is no condemnation towards our sin, but also that God's holiness has not changed He hates it no less in His children than His enemies and does still chasten. Confession does not play the same role in a believer's life and an unbeliever's. In the case of a Christian it is to heal an already existing relationship and to pursue holiness, in the unbeliever it is to begin a relationship. 1 John 1:9, 'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'

Confession and prayer are linked in that if we are not regular in confessing and repenting of our sins the Lord uses a bronze heaven in prayer as a tool for chastening. Psalm 66:18-19, 'If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer.' In Malachi we see men divorcing their wives and God stops answering their prayers because of their sin, Mal. 2:13-14, 'And this second thing you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. 14 But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.' Peter applies this to husbands who are being harsh and not understanding towards their wives, 1 Pet. 3:7, 'Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.' Confession and repentance of sin and answers to prayer are linked.

Deliverance prayer

So imagine this situation where Israel is genuinely and earnestly seeking the Lord, they have come in a spirit of humility and are mid-repentance and the Philistines turn up. This dominating power is obviously unhappy with this unified meeting and seeks to sneak up on them when they are weak and vulnerable. V7, '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.' Firstly, we see that Israel is not parading a cock-sure attitude as they did when they tried to use the Ark as a lucky charm, they turn instead to prayer, v8, '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.'" Just as we have seen an attitude change in regard to their sins we see that they have an attitude change in how they deal with God, they ask in faith and don't assume. Humility is expressed in prayer; dependence is expressed in prayer; faith is expressed in prayer. The proud, the independent and the doubting do not pray.

They cry out for Samuel to pray for them, and notice the detail that the text places before us, v9, '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.' What do you think the lesson is that this detail is included? Prayer is powerless and can do nothing, the sacrifice opens up the way for prayer to have any influence with God. Because of our sins our prayers are as filthy rags in His sight. It is the sacrifice that qualifies the sinner to come. We all must die because of sin, but God in His holy justice has made a way for sinners to enter His presence and be objects of His favour. God has provided the way of sacrifice where an innocent substitute opens the way for us to come to God. We see that the sacrifice is called a burnt offering, every Jew knew this would have been for the purposes of atonement. This action on Samuel's part takes us straight to Christ who is the one who has opened up a way for us with His own body as the sacrifice that we might be able to come and pray in our times of need. We are told that the animal was still nursing, this is likely to draw our attention to the fact that Samuel was following the Lord's instruction that a lamb must be eight days or older in order to be sacrificed. Many have pointed out the significance of the eighth day. It was the day a child was to be circumcised into the covenant; it was the day firstborn animals were to be offered to the Lord; the first tabernacle service was on the eighth day; Noah had eight who survived, Jesus rose on the eighth day and the Spirit was given on the eighth day. It is thought to be a the day of salvation, the day of new beginnings, the Lord's Day, the first day of the week. And we see that God answered Samuel. All these details are deliberate on God's part and pressing upon us the need for holiness through Christ. Every Christian who has trusted in Christ to be their saviour is in Christ and prays in Christ's name, and Christ stands at the right hand of the Father passing, as it were, all our prayers to the Father as if they were His sweetened with the aroma of His rightstanding. I would say that there is one great difference between our prayers and the prayers of these Jews. We know that we are heard for God always receives His Son, these Jews did not have all the information we have.

Answered prayer

God's covenant people have repented of their sins and according to His covenant faithfulness God will now answer their prayers, v10, '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 routed before Israel.' Here we see the mercy of God. Here are a sinful people who do not deserve mercy, but God who is merciful hears them for they have come through the sacrifice with

penitent hearts. God in His grace answers them and miraculously delivers them. He does this by causing a mighty thundering sound to confound and cause a rout before Israel. All that was left was for Israel to chase them down and mop up after God, v11, 'And the men of Israel went out from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them, as far as below Beth-car.' There seems to be a deliberate contrast between Israel gathered, the ark brought into the camp and the loud noise of the Israelite's self-confident lucky charm religious shouts, and God's true presence among a gathered, but praying and penitent Israel, and God is truly there and He makes the noise and defeats the Philistines in a Jericho style triumph. It is as if He is deliberately teaching them what they failed to learn 20 years earlier. He is teaching them to come in prayer and repentance not in a self-confident lucky charm religious fashion that reduces Him to an idol.

V12 is the climax of this story before the chapter ends with a summary of Samuel's rule, '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.'" Ebenezer is one of those words that is often pointed out by modern songs writers who want to do away with older hymns as an example of archaic language that makes old hymns useless. The trouble is not with the hymns but with the ignorance of modern Christians who should know all about this tremendous chapter where a gracious God saves a sinful people. Samuel sets up a stone monument. Stone was often used because it was long lasting. It was often used in the Bible, e.g. Bethel and the crossing of the Jordan. It was a visual reminder of the past actions of God that were meant to be remembered by the generations to come. Modern Christians have failed to remember and so criticise the usefulness of this word. Ebenezer means stone of help. Samuel adds this very important addition to its meaning, 'till now the LORD has helped us.' This is a very important addition because it says, not only is God faithful in this situation and has heard our prayer and we remember a prayer answering God. No, it says much more. It says, God has been faithful to Israel when we were unfaithful. We had abandoned God and gone after idols, we had left Him, but He had never left us. We had proven faithless but He is faithful and keeps His promises. This means that even those bad times when the Philistines were oppressing Israel, that was not prove of the absence of God but the love of God. Ebenezer is not only saying God answers prayer, but that behind it all despite our faithfulness is a God who is working all things together for good. He is accomplishing His purposes and does not fail.

So take note of this snap shot of a good time in Israel, see sinners acting as they ought to in prayer and dependence, see the sacrifice as the way to God and a reminder of Christ, and see the God of covenant faithfulness who is our Ebenezer.