

A tale of two futures

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[0:00] I have a question for you this morning, and it might provoke feelings. What were you doing 20 years ago?

! Who here can remember 20 years ago?! I had only some egg mayo sandwiches, and that stuck with me for all those years.

For others, it might have been a difficult time. I know people in that situation, maybe you choose not to remember. Or maybe you're too young to remember, and instead you're wondering where you'll be in 20 years.

That's a massive question, isn't it? Where will I be in 20 years? I remember when I was 20, wondering the very same question.

And one day I woke up and I was 40. I couldn't believe it. I thought someone had made a mistake somewhere. I remember saying to my mum, something's wrong here.

[1:13] And I suspected something might happen after I turned 39, but it was still a shock. But I can't help but think about... Oh, here's the title of this sermon today, by the way.

The Tale of Two Futures. Which I think might be the coolest title I've come up with so far for a sermon. And here's something I can't help but think about when we ask that question about where might I be in 20 years.

It's a grow your own bonsai tree. I found it in a supermarket a couple of weeks ago. And I'm really looking forward to growing it and naming it and attributing lots of human characteristics to it that some people might find silly.

But maybe, just maybe, in 20 years' time, I'll look at this tree and I'll look back and I'll remember this sermon.

I might remember all of your faces. I might not. I might not. But 20 years can disappear pretty quickly, can't it?

[2:27] I think some of us can attest to that. It forces us to ask the question, what have I done with that time?

And maybe for the younger people, it forces us to question, what will I do with that time? So over the past few weeks, we've been following this story of God's people through some pretty tragic and pretty dark times.

As our chapter today opens, we get a slightly different perspective on the story. We're just going to recap on a few things.

Verses 1 and 2, we see 20 years have zoomed by. This is 20 years since the ark of the Lord was returned to God's people.

And then towards the end of the chapter, you might notice you see a reflection on the lives of these people. If you've been following along in the book of Samuel, you might have noticed, as I did, the absence of the ark in the narrative of the chapter.

[3:44] The ark is there. It's being guarded, as we heard at the beginning. But it's no longer at the center of the story. The ark is mentioned 40 times in 1 Samuel.

39 times, as I counted, up until verse 2 of this chapter. The word pops up later again in chapter 14, but apparently it's not actually referring to the ark.

It's referring to the ephod. The ark really doesn't come back into the story until 2 Samuel chapter 6. So the ark is barely mentioned in our chapter, where it's been such an integral part of the story.

But I think these first two verses are, they present an important backdrop to the chapter. I think they're there to remind us of the context. They're inviting us to remember.

So we're going to take five minutes or so just remembering how we've got to this point in the story. So the ark was a box belonging to God, containing holy items.

[4:50] Hebrews 9.4 tells us it contained the Ten Commandments, a gold jar containing manna, and Aaron's budding staff. That's from Numbers 17.10.

On top of the ark, between two cherubim, was the mercy seat where God met with his high priest. When we look at what these things might represent, I suggest the following.

And I managed to get all Ps. I don't know if you noticed this. His presence, provision, priesthood, precepts, and place with his people. So this ark was a massively holy thing.

Deeply represented the presence of God and his relationship with his people. It should have demanded the utmost respect and the utmost care.

But instead, Israel treated the ark as if it was a lucky charm. Essentially, they thought that they could unleash their God upon their enemy and gain a victory. Needless to say, God was not happy about that.

[6:10] And it did not go well for the Israelites after. God responded. God responded. He cut Israel's leaders down, the corrupt leaders, exactly as he wanted to in chapter 3, verse 34.

He allows Israel's armies to be defeated. But the truly devastating blow to Israel is that God allows the Philistines to capture the ark and take it away.

From this point in the story, it looks like Israel almost realizes the gravity of their mistake. Sorry, I lost my place.

Ah, yes. The Philistines. The Philistines. We see them in a time of unfathomable grief and distress. In fact, just the very news of the ark being carried off and stolen causes Eli the priest to fall backwards off of a chair and break his neck, dying.

His daughter-in-law gives birth, dying, having lost both her husband and father-in-law, and names her child Ichabod, which means, in the very strictest sense, no glory.

[7:27] Essentially, the thought behind that was this idea that God had departed. Gone off into exile and left them on his own.

Suddenly, it looks like God is no longer a lucky charm to Israel, but a close and dear friend that's gone and left them with nothing but ruin. But seven months later, the ark was returned by the Philistines as their people were plagued with tumors and death through God's wrath.

And on its return, there was rejoicing in Israel for a time. But the people were once again careless with God's holy things, and the people were struck down dead for their sin.

So what was supposed to be a time of reconciliation and joy ended as a time of judgment. And God's people asked, who can stand in the presence of the Lord?

And so we get to our chapter today. Twenty years have passed. The ark has long been back with God's people, with the priests at Kirith-Jerim, who are guarding it. And so, the narrative continues on.

[8:50] So we kind of expect to find God's people in a happy place, don't we? I mean, that would be the kind of natural conclusion that we come to. They lost the ark.

It was taken away. They were so much grieving. And the ark comes back. And you think over a period of time, yeah, they would be happy. But we see straight away that that's not the case. Because here they are 20 years later, and something is still very, very wrong. Look at the end of verse 2 in our chapter. I don't think the NIV, or I've got the new NIV, which doesn't really capture the thought.

So the quote I have is from the ESV, and it says, And all of the house of Israel lamented after the Lord. Now, in the older NIV, the Bibles that you've got, what does that say, that line?

It's the same thing, is it? Okay. The Hebrew words here in that line appear to be synonymous with groaning and lamenting after something or someone.

[10:06] So there's one thing very, very clear to us this morning as we've been reflecting on this. That the returning of the ark to God's people, just having the ark back in their position, in their possession, sorry, was not enough to fix Israel's relationship with God.

Because 20 years later, here they are. They're coming together. They're regretful. They're sad. They're lamenting. They're seeking after God. And I want to communicate the sadness here, if you

haven't picked up on it.

It's been 20 years. It seems that God is still departed from Israel's land. But then Samuel enters the scene. And we haven't heard of anything of Samuel in this time.

But he appears very prominently in this chapter. So we see a snapshot of a period in his life. So he begins to judge or be leader over Israel. So he speaks.

Samuel speaks. We know it's not just Samuel speaking, but he speaks on behalf of the Lord.

Chapter 3, verse 19. Chapter 4, verse 1 says, So Samuel speaks.

[11:48] But it's not just Samuel speaking. It's God speaking. And we see suddenly a very different picture. He says, If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts.

We'll pause there. You notice Samuel straight away. He's talking about the people returning to God. Not God to the people. After all their distress and pain at losing the ark, God's people were convinced that God's presence had departed from amongst them.

But here we see the truth. God never left. It wasn't the Israelites' land that become desolate of God. It was their hearts.

But there is hope. As Samuel has noticed, God's people seem to be genuinely longing and needing to get right with the Lord himself. They're no longer on the search for the magical ark or craving his power, as it were.

They seem to want a proper relationship with God. But of course, this is just what Samuel sees on the surface. The root of this longing needs to run much, much deeper.

[13:03] So Samuel goes on to add that there are things that must be done. Action that must be taken for reconciliation to take place between God and his people.

He continues, Rid yourselves of foreign gods and asterisks. That's action number one. Notice he doesn't say, Get rid of that poster of Belle that's on your bedroom wall.

Do that and you're sorted. Everything's fine. Christy. What he says is, If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, Rid yourselves of the foreign gods and asterisks.

See, for Israel, and it seems to me, They started out treating God's holy ark as an idol. And all those little seeds have been allowed to take root.

And over the course of 20 years, It's got completely out of control. And here are God's people in a bit of a mess, Worshipping fertility gods And probably following all the evil things that go along with worshipping idols, And particularly those kind of idols.

[14:22] Getting right with God doesn't begin externally. It has to begin at the deepest level, The heart level. And then it works its way out. Samuel continues, Commit yourselves to the Lord and serve Him only.

Hebrew here is actually a bit different. This word for heart is repeated. It says, Prepare, make steadfast your hearts for Yahweh, God. I see something amazing here.

I think that's a beautiful verse. Prepare your hearts for God. The amazing thing I see is, Even after 20 years of Israel's unfaithfulness, As they worshipped false gods and idols, And turned their back on Him, God was right there, And waiting for them to give their hearts to Him.

Isn't that a beautiful thing? And it's followed up with this promise, Of God's continued faithfulness in verse 3.

Serve Him only, And He will deliver you, Out of the hand of the Philistines. Continued faithfulness.

[15:40] So I ask you, It's my question to you this morning, What kind of God do you see in this text? In light of everything we've just seen, What kind of God do you see?

People talk about the wrathful God of the Old Testament, Don't they? I think someone else mentioned this a few weeks ago. I don't know about you, But I see incredible grace, Absolute patience, And steadfast love.

Against all the rejection, God invites His people, Back into a relationship with Him, With the promise of deliverance. And how did God's people respond?

Verse 4. They put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, Their idols, And served the Lord only.

We can cheer here, Yeah, they got it right! Finally! It's only been 20 years. In retrospect, That's quite easy for us to say, Isn't it?

[16:53] Hey, they got it right. We need to ask that question for ourselves. Have we put away our idols? That's an interesting question, Isn't it?

Have we really got shot of our idols, From our lives, From our hearts? God's people responded with obedience.

And it would be easy for us to say, It's okay. I don't own a Baal, Or an Ashtoreth. But today, As God's people, In an increasingly hostile world, Against God, People that don't recognize Him, A world that doesn't recognize Him, There are plenty of things out there, That can stand, In the way of a relationship, Between us and God.

There are plenty of idols out there. They can be the seemingly, Harmful things, Drugs and alcohol, That's the obvious one. Casual sex.

Or, They can be the seemingly, Harmless things. Catching up with a TV in the evening, Is all right, Isn't it?

[18:02] But is it replacing your Bible time? Is it replacing your time with God? When you wake up in the morning, Are you committing your day to God? Are we committing our day to God, In prayer?

Are we looking at His word? Or instead, Are we scrolling through, Facebook, Or Instagram, Or whatever? Are the conversations, That we have, Have with each other, Are they purposeful, And filled with truth?

Are they? Or are they solely being filled up, With unhelpful things? I'm not saying, That it's wrong to enjoy, All of these things.

I think that would be the wrong thing to say, God gives us many things to enjoy. But are we putting God first? Are our hearts, Really truly reserved for Him?

When we go into a week, Or a day, We're going to work, Or we're at home, Are our hearts there? Or are we trying to squeeze Him in somewhere, At the end of the day, Or week?

[19:26] Oh, Just get that timing, I must just do that. Like it's a task. Like Israel, We're all together, In this situation.

Putting away the idols, Putting away the bells, And the asteroids. It means taking action, As Israel have done. We don't do it on our own, We do it together, Don't we?

We look out for each other, With God's help. Verses 5 to 6, Samuel calls all Israel, To assemble at Mizpah, Saying that he'll intercede, Pray for them, And it's in this place, We see a big ceremony, Take place.

There's this admission of guilt, As people, Fast and confess, The fact that they have sinned, Against the Lord. There's this pouring out, Of water.

And I lost my place again, It's been a while, Since I've done this, Bear with me.

[20:37] There we go. This is pouring out of water, And I'm going to be completely honest, I'm not really sure, What that's about. I suspect, My thoughts, Aaron's thoughts, Are that they're, Symbolic of cleansing, Representing the desire, For God to, To pour out his mercy, And cleansing.

Some commentators, Have suggested that it represents, Them pouring out their hearts, To God. You can make up your own minds, On that, I think. I think there's some validity, In all of those things.

But ceremonies, Usually mark the beginning, Or end of something, Don't they? God's people, Would turn their back, Turn back, Sorry, To the Lord, From the sin in their hearts, And then marking it, With a ceremony.

I imagine it would be, A public declaration. This was a day of true, Repentance, For God's people. This is where, The sin ends, And our relationship with God, Re-begins, Re-ignites.

There must be, True repentance, In the lives of God's people. Recognition of wrong, Done before the Lord. I don't think this means, We have to start, Chucking buckets of water, Everywhere on a Sunday morning.

[21:57] I don't think Daniel, Would be too happy with that. But admitting where we failed, And turning to Jesus, In prayer, Is a key part, To loving God, And being cleansed.

1 John 1, Verses 8 to 9, Says this, If we claim to be without sin, We deceive ourselves, And the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just, And will forgive us our sins, And purify us, From all unrighteousness.

Hallelujah. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just, And will forgive us our sins, And purify us. It's not up to us to be perfect, It's up to us to make the effort. We're purified through the blood of Jesus. Moving on to verse 6, The end of verse 6, Samuel judged the people of Israel, At Mizpah, I.e.

He was serving as leader. He became a figure of leadership, Over Israel. This wasn't just in spiritual matters of prayer, And things that we see there.

[23:16] But actually, Military strategy. You don't expect that, Do you? He always, Military leader of some sort, In some senses, This is actually true.

You see, Samuel, Led by the Lord, Had a very, Very good reason, For bringing the people up to Mizpah. It wasn't an accident, He didn't pick it at random.

Mizpah was a high place, A very high place. And by gathering all of Israel there, It was sure to provoke the Philistines, Into attacking them.

Therefore, As we hear this information, We must keep in mind, The promise that we heard in verse 3, That God, Would deliver Israel, From the hand of the Philistines. So there's a dual purpose, Or seems to be a dual purpose, That Samuel has, For this gathering.

Purpose number one, The public ceremony, Of Israel's repentance. Purpose number two, To bring about a situation, Whereby God, Would be glorified in victory, Over the Philistines.

[24:32] Verse number seven, Verse number seven, The battle commences, Things were to be very different, From the last battle.

Israel aren't going in, Over confident, Relying on lucky charms, It's a very different story, Instead, They're scared, They're frightened, They're relying on God, For the victory.

And in the face of trouble, Even death, Prayer, Was their first defense. They'd listen to God's promise, His word, That he would deliver them, And they were wholly dependent, On that promise, For rescue.

I wonder, If we can say the same thing, In our lives. Are we wholly, Dependent, On God's promise, For rescue.

Is our first response, To battle, To go to prayer. That's an interesting question, Isn't it? I'd probably panic. Difficult situations, I do tend to panic, It just seems to be the way, I'm wired up.

[25:53] I never used to, As I've got older, It seems to be something, That happens. God is saying in this text, All you need is prayer. Come to me. So Samuel, In this priestly role, Intercedes, For God's people, With an offering, And cries out, To the Lord, On behalf of Israel.

I want us to look at the way, That Samuel, That Samuel approaches, The Lord. There's a heavy contrast, To the way that the Israelites, Have approached God, In the past.

Samuel's approach, By the lamb, Is deliberate, Is measured, Is respectful, Even though the battle, Is right on top of them, Perhaps even, Meters away, And there's Samuel, Preparing the lamb, Calmly, Sacrificing, Praying, Praying, Even while the offering, Is being made, The Lord answered him, Look at verse 10, There's nothing vague, About God's answer to prayer, In this chapter, I've picked out three aspects, That we can look at, Firstly, It was immediate, The enemy were ready, To engage Israel, Even while Samuel, Was still sacrificing, The lamb, God answered prayer, Straight away, He responded,

Came to people's, His people's rescue, Secondly, It was loud, So loud, It threw the Philistines, Into panic, And scared them, Thirdly, It was purposeful, The exact timing, Of the thunder, Enabled Israel, To gain a military advantage, A tactical advantage, Over the Philistines, And bring about, The victory, Over their enemies, It was said of God, In 1 Samuel, 2 verse 10, Those who oppose, The Lord will be broken, The most high, Will thunder, From heaven, Psalm 29, 3 says this, The voice of the Lord, Is over the waters, The God of glory, Thunders, And the Lord, Thunders, Over the mighty waters, The sound of thunder,

Has long been associated, With God's voice, And there's little doubt here, That when the text says, That God answered, It was very audible, Everybody heard it, Even the enemies of God, Because it sent them running, Such power, Behind God's voice, Just his voice, And they scattered, They run away, From God, And God's people, Are left with a victory, And I have to say, What a victory, God's

people seem weak, And incapable, In fact they were weak, And incapable, But they had one thing, That they could do, They could pray, They had God on their side, And God protected them, He looked after his people, And gave them victory, He was faithful, And he kept by his promise, Samuel is keen,

[29:34] To give full acknowledgement, To the Lord, In this victory, And he set up a stone, And he named it Ebenezer, Meaning stone of help, Saying thus far the Lord, Has helped us, I didn't pick up on this at first, It was actually, Phil that pointed it out to me, It was a fairly odd thing to say, How do we take that, Thus far the Lord has helped us, Seems a bit odd, Because they've just reunited, With the Lord, I wasn't really sure, What to make of it, But I'm going to say this, That, I think Samuel here, Is not just recounting, God's help for the battle won, But I think his mind, Is on the future, The chapter as a whole, Gives this like, This overview of lives, It's a snapshot, Into a generation,

Of people that have turned, Back to God, Maybe, Samuel is acknowledging, That there's still battles, To be fought, Thus far God has helped us, Ask the question, Will we continue, To let God help us, Will we continue to pray, In the heat of battle, So as the chapter, Draws to a close, Camera zooms out, From this scene, We get this bigger perspective, God's blessings, Continued, To be poured out, For Israel, He didn't just deliver, Israel from the Philistines, Once and take a back seat, And let things unfold, Text says his hand, Was against the Philistines, Philistines, As verse 13, Points out throughout, Samuel's lifetime, This was a life, Thing, The land, That once looked desolate,

Of the God of Israel, Was now full of his blessings, As he poured out his grace, Upon his people, Restoring territory, Is God's business, Restoring peace, Is God's business, We see that, In this text, As the curtain, Comes down on the chapter, We see, Samuel, Who was at work, For the Lord, All his life, Being judge, And leader, Over Israel, Kept working, For the Lord, Now, I don't know, How you feel, About that ending, I thought it was lovely, After all the trouble, After all the, The chaos, And the problems, That we've seen, With God's people, Over the, These last few weeks, And what a fitting ending, Say, Well actually, In some way, Things turned out okay, Because, They returned, To the Lord, The Lord, The Lord was in their life, Day after day, Helping them, Interceding for them, What a wonderful message, What a wonderful note, To end on, As we come to the close, Of this chapter, At the beginning, I said that, I had a very cool title, For this sermon, And it was a, A tale of two futures, I still think that's cool, There are two futures, In this chapter, Aren't there, The first one showed, Where God's people, Ended up without God, In their lives, 20 years of idol worship, At the beginning, They were in a mess, I suppose they thought, They were doing alright, It went on for 20 years, But, They just ended up sad, And lonely, And facing destruction, The second future,

Was when they came, To their senses, And they turned back, To God, Where they trusted in him, For the rest of their future, We saw God's mercy, And grace, As he provided a way, Back for them, God raised up a leader, A priest, An intercessor, And led them back, To him in repentance, With sacrifice, And prayer, And he didn't stop there, He continued on, Through their lives, Bringing peace, And restoration, To his people, Fulfilling his promises, So as we close, I'm aware, Some of us here, Can look back on many, Many years, And reflect on God's hell, Some may be many more, Some might only be, At the very, Very beginning, Of their journey, And they're wondering, What's in store, We've all got different, Perspectives, Haven't we, We'll come from different,

[34:40] Places, But we do, All, Each one of us here, Whether you believe, Whether you don't believe, Whether you're old, Whether you're young, Whatever, We all have this, One thing in common, That today, Is a day, Where we have a fresh, Opportunity, To be committing, Our hearts, Fully to the Lord, So the answer, To the great question, Where will my bonsai tree, Be in 20 years time, The answer is, I don't know, I don't know, Where it will be, I don't know, If it will grow, We don't know, What tomorrow, Might bring for us, Might be good things, Might see, God's blessings, Endlessly, It might be things, That scare us, Because this is life, It's not really,

The question to say, Where will we be, In 20 years, Actually, What the question is, Are you going to face it alone, In uncertainty, And wonder, Just by chance, Where you'll end up, Or will you face tomorrow, With God, And live a life, Of seeing his rich love, And care, Poured out on your lives, That's my plan, I want God, I want God, To be in my life forever, That's what I want, I want to see, His grace, And his blessings, Poured out, Not on just me, But on everybody, The same God, That provided a way back, To him, For his people, All those thousands, Of years ago, Is the same God today, He hasn't changed, And he's providing, A way back for us, Today, Through Jesus Christ, Who made the ultimate, Sacrifice, By paying the price, Of our sins, Showing us, The way back to God, And sitting, At the right hand, Of the Father, Interceding for us, As we close, I'm going to leave us, With another, One of God's promises, For his people, From Revelation 21, I saw the holy city, The new Jerusalem, Coming down out of heaven, From God, Prepared as a bride, Beautifully dressed, For her husband, And I heard a loud voice, From the throne, Saying, Look, God's dwelling place, Is now among the people, And he will, Dwell with them, They will be his people, And God himself, Will be with them, And be their God, He will wipe, Every tear, From their eyes, There will be, No more death, Or mourning, Or crying, Or pain, For the old order of things, Has passed away, Amen.