

...to establish His purposes

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Preacher: Nicholas Winther

[0 : 00] The reading this morning is taken from 1 Samuel, chapter 7, starting at verse 2. From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-gena, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord.

And Samuel said to all the house of the Lord, If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtarothe 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.

So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtarothe, and they served the Lord only. Then Samuel said, Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you.

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.

Now when the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the Lord of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines.

[1 : 14] 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. So Samuel took a sucking 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. 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. And the men of Israel went out from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them as far as below Bethkar.

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. 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.

[2 : 25] There was peace also between Israel and the Amorites. Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life, and he went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah.

And he judged Israel in all these places. 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.

Well, thank you, Elaine, and a very warm welcome this morning to all. Now, as Elaine has just read, we're going to be spending our time this morning in 1 Samuel chapter 7.

And it would be great if you keep your Bibles open, just to check I'm not making it up as we go along. And on the back of the sheets, when you came in, you will see that there's some notes. Do use that if you find that useful.

It's great to jot notes or just to be reminded where we are. It can be very helpful for some. Well, let me start with a question. When was the last time you felt something of a distance between yourself and God?

[3 : 30] Maybe it was before you were questioned. Maybe you do now. Maybe you're feeling as though God has abandoned you to a particularly hard point in your life.

Or perhaps there's something that we've been ashamed of in our lives, where we've just gone and done something again and again, knowing we shouldn't, knowing God loathes it, but doing it anyway.

Anyway, well, I don't know about you, but that's probably the sort of thing that affects me the most. When we go and offend God, and yet know we've done it, loathes ourselves for it, and almost can't bear to be with him.

If I speak, of course, of sin in some thought or word or action, something that's out of step with God's perfect will for our lives, yet we've done it again.

Or perhaps, perhaps you've never felt close to God. Perhaps in your heart of hearts you know there is a God, but you've no idea how to approach him. Well, this is exactly the position in which God's people find themselves as we start this week's passage.

[4 : 46] As those keen adherents to Dig Deeper will know, context is supremely important as we look at the Bible, and no less so for 1 Samuel chapter 7.

Now, over the last few weeks, we've been seeing how the writer of 1 Samuel explores various aspects of God's sovereignty at work, hence the title of the book, God Stepping In.

And we saw it in those glorious depictions of God in Hannah's prayer, back in chapter 2, as the God who lifts up and brings low, the God who protects his faithful ones, and yet the God who judges, cutting off the wicked in darkness.

Well, last week we saw the people of Israel themselves brought low, indeed, as God stepped in with his sovereignty expressed in judgment on them.

Israel had been suffering under failed and corrupt religious leadership from Eli and his sons, and as bad as these religious leaders were, their people weren't much better.

[5 : 54] We saw last week them treating the Ark of the Covenant like some sort of magic charm, and this week we see them depicted as idolaters, worshipping the foreign gods, and those of the Canaanite predecessors in the land.

Sure enough, they find themselves on the receiving end. As God brings his judgment on them, he uses their neighbors, the Philistines, to soundly rout them in battle.

The Israelite army is defeated and dispersed, the corrupt religious leadership is dead, as God had promised. The Ark itself is captured by the Philistines, and all at once, the nascent nation of Israel appears to be in ruins.

They have no leadership, they're beset by enemies, and they as good as have no God. I mentioned earlier, those who feel a distance with God.

Well, surely, these are a people who feel that distance. But as John, in his talk last week, helped us to see, the author made clear time and again that it was the Lord himself who was sovereignly controlling these things.

[7 : 06] We saw it in those almost comic scenes, where the Lord shows the Philistine God, Dagon, to be nothing more than an idol, leaving the statue prostrate before the Lord's Ark, with its arms and head removed, symbolically humbled, and depicted as incapable of speech or action.

And you remember when we too saw the holiness of this sovereign God, the Philistines came to realise the Ark was too hot to handle.

And before long, they got rid of it as quickly as they could, allowing God, or watching God rather, take it back to Israel, with relief and fear written in their hearts.

And lastly, we saw too that God's holiness is just as much a challenge for Israel themselves, as much as for the Philistines. The Ark arrived back, and with it, the continued outpouring of the Lord's judgment on the people.

As we saw last week in 620, as the people of Beth Shemesh say, who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? And to whom shall he go up away from us?

[8 : 20] Well, so as we arrive in chapter 7, fresh in our minds are these reminders of God's blazing sovereignty over not just his people, but over all peoples. We're reminded of his awesome, fearful judgment that stems from his perfect holiness.

And we're left with that quandary, that tension so often from the Old Testament. How can this people, how can this people be reconciled to this sovereign, holy God?

How can he not keep himself at a distance? A question that stands for true for us too. How can we be confident of this holy, sovereign God being willing to stay reconciled to us?

Well, as our passage this week opens, we see that that challenge has proved no short-term blip. In verse 2, we read, a long time has passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord.

For twenty years, Israel has lamented after the Lord. They're feeling sorrow and regret. But not just regret or sorrow because life is hard or somehow backfiring on them.

[9 : 36] No, here the regret is after the Lord. They long for their relationship with God to be as it was before. They're missing the time when they were his beloved people and he was their protector, their guard, as Hannah sang.

Well, in this passage, in 1 Samuel, we're going to look at how God steps in to reconcile them to him. We'll see how God guides people through his prophet Samuel to a position of repentance and that as God's people repent, we see God grant them forgiveness and reconciliation.

Further, we'll see that as God reconciles his people to himself, so they come under his blessing, his good rule, and we'll see a glimpse of what it means to be living in the life of his promethers.

But let's look at our first section today, verses 2 to 6, where we'll see that God's sovereignty demands repentance. God's sovereignty demands repentance.

The people long for God. They long for God to be their God, but for God to be that again to them, then Samuel shows them that they need to learn to treat him as God should be treated.

[10 : 55] Look with me at verse 3. 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 Ashtoreth 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.

Well, Samuel, God's chosen prophet, calls his people to return to the Lord, that is to repent. Well, now today, when people around us use the word repent, mostly I think we see it as being sorry almost or wishing it had all been another way or even just regrets.

But what we see demanded of the Israelites by God is not a weak, slightly embarrassed, English form of I'm terribly sorry. No, here we see that it's not that repentance is sorrow, but it flows out of sorrow.

Remember verse 2, the people were lamenting after the Lord. But turning to God is not just this sort of fresh start, but rather a positive move to God himself to live for him, to serve him.

It's not just an acknowledgement of him, it's not just sympathizing with his views of the world, it's about coming back to him wholeheartedly, looking to shape our lives around him, or as Samuel says, serving him.

- [12 : 18] Remember verse 3, if you're returning to the Lord with all your heart, then serve him only. Well, in today's culture, we're constantly battered, aren't we, with the idea that the only way to go is to be an individual, to do what makes us happy, to do what we want to do, whatever anyone else says.

But in a culture obsessed with this sort of individualistic mantra, it's no surprise that people are, see serving God as more than a little weird. We've grown up in a way that sees beliefs as these optional extras, and we're almost bred to the idea of seeing changing what we are like, based on what we believe as being almost ridiculous.

But as if we're just doing the whole God thing, to be a little bit comfort around the edges of our lives, as if we can just hitch a ride for the bits of the spiritual journey that we like, the duck out bits that are hard, and assume somehow that God won't mind.

But Samuel is clear. God does mind. He gives us a choice to go our own way or to go the Lord's way. And as far as God is concerned, there are no half measures.

Real repentance means turning to him, as Samuel says, with all of our hearts, all of our words, our actions, our desires, our gifts, our skills, our opportunities even, all dedicated towards our Lord in his service.

- [13 : 48] And if turning towards him is hard enough, then of course it must almost mean turning away from everything else. As Samuel says, put away the foreign gods and 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.

Well, in Israel's case, in the time of Samuel, we see that as well as nodding ahead to God himself, they've been adopting the religions of the indigenous locals, the Canaanites.

They may see themselves as God's people, but they were far from exclusive in their relationship, happy to have the backups in their back pocket. But Samuel is clear.

if you will hear God's call to trust, to treat God as God, then there isn't room in our hearts for these idols as well. And of course, this is where the challenge comes for us, isn't it?

We may not have a Buddha in the corner of our room, but really getting rid of the things in our lives which are obsessing us is hard.

- [14 : 57] We don't have to be that honest with ourselves to realize that we want to have our cake and eat it. We want to have God, but still to have our peccadillos and pet passions. It's the sort of God on Sundays, but godlessness all through the week.

Or the person caught between attending the CU at school or college and recess within part of the crowd the rest of the time. Or growth groups on Tuesdays, but out drinking to excess on Fridays.

The flirtations which are so dangerous the gossip with friends that's so harmful. We may not have these little golden Buddhas, but it does dominate our hearts.

We have these idols nonetheless. The desires for looking good in front of others. The concern for what happens to our family, for our jobs, for careers.

The desires almost the need we're described as for holidays, for retirement, for houses, for friends. Those slightly addictive hobbies which take up far too much time when our responsibilities lie elsewhere.

- [16 : 03] The challenge, of course, is that many of these things can be good gifts, can't they? They're from God and of themselves can be wonderful, but it's our attitude to them that can so easily become twisted.

They easily become the be-all and end-all. And slowly we find that whilst we thought we were thanking God for them, they have become our gods. In the face of these things, if we truly wish to seek the Lord as Samuel invites, then these may be the things we need to give up as idols.

These may be the attitudes we need to reshape. But in verses 5 and 6, we see that repentance involves not just turning to God, but a very real honesty before God.

Samuel called the people together to collectively seek the Lord's forgiveness. As you read in verse 5, Samuel says, Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you.

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. So the people gather and they show real contrition as before the sovereign Lord they declare, We have sinned against the Lord.

[17 : 24] Now this phrase is wonderful to read, isn't it? It's a straightforward claim of guilt, an acknowledgement of responsibility before the Lord. I don't know about you, but to me, it's completely out of place in today's culture.

Young children show it best of all. They stand with an angry look on their face, assembling on the floor in front of them, and what do they say? It wasn't me. It wasn't my fault. But of course, it's not really just young children, is it?

Which of us, to our friends, when some self-constructed problem arises, don't turn to them and say, Oh, never mind. It's not your fault. What bad luck.

No, we're all very good in our culture of avoiding responsibility. I'm busy trying to assign blame to whoever we can, whether it's circumstances or our upbringing, to biased teachers or a boss, or as John Galliano recently claimed, it wasn't him, it was the drugs or the alcohol.

But to the Christian, as to the Old Testament believers in today's passage, we know that when we stand before our Father in heaven, the one who knows the depths of our hearts, we can't blame anyone else.

[18 : 39] We are the ones who make the choices we regret. We are the ones who opt for self-interest over the wishes of our Creator and Lord. We are the ones who look to our own wants before the needs of others.

Well, we've seen that real repentance comes out of seeing the Lord for who he is, for longing for the Lord, and that it involves a wholehearted turning to the Lord and turning away from other things.

And that would take our attention away from him. And indeed, we've seen the honest confession of the Israelites too. And all that leads us, though, is to the problem of our past. For indeed, we may have the best of intentions, but the wrongs we've already done are still there, aren't they?

For the Israelites in our story, they may have started in the right direction now, but they still have the broken, covenant promises of their past. They have treated God as they should not.

Their relationship is already broken. Which leads us to this question of how will reconciliation be possible? Well, just as it takes a sovereign God through his prophet Samuel to call them back, it takes a sovereign God to have mercy through his prophet sacrifice.

[19 : 57] So let's move on to our second section, verses 7 to 11. God saves his people. God saves his people. So verse 7.

Now when the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the laws of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines.

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.

The Philistines hear their neighbours are gathering again, just as they did 20 years before. And whether they view this as an opportunity to deal a decisive blow against them, or as a threat that needs to be put down, is not clear.

But either way, they quickly gather the troops to come against Israel. And the Israelites hear about it, and they fear. And it's hard not to sympathise with them.

[20 : 57] Will God consign them to defeat like last time? Will he see them wiped from the earth for their sin? Or will he stand for them as their guard and salvation?

Will he bring the Israelites even lower, cursing them off as the wicked? Or will he raise them up? Well, marvellously, we are reminded that God longs to forgive those who turn back to him.

For in the face of real repentance, God offers real forgiveness. As we see in verse 9, 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. 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. And the men of Israel went out from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them as far as below Beth-kar. Well, the people come to God's appointed prophet, Samuel, and through him seek forgiveness.

[22 : 07] Samuel offers the atoning sacrifice to the Lord. Samuel cries out to the Lord for his people, and the Lord answers Samuel. And God does act to save his doomed people.

He divinely intervenes with a storm that thunders against the Philistines. And this time, 20 years later, it is their turn to be routed before the Lord. And as they are struck with confusion and pursued by the Israelites, they never fully recover.

And of course, this is nothing more than Hannah promised in her prayer over 20 years before, remembering chapter 2 and verse 10. The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces.

Against them, he will thunder in heaven. So we see here, Israelites showing the beautiful, well, the beautiful pattern for how the Lord reconciles a people to himself as his appointed servant offers an atoning sacrifice, the sacrifice to take the punishment that people deserve just as much as we do now.

Of course, each and every one of us who is a Christian has had to experience this process in some way, shape or form too. We too have had to recognise our need for the Lord.

[23 : 21] We too have had to turn our hearts to him, seeking him, looking to serve him, putting away idols. We too have had to confess our sins before him as we did in the prayer of confession earlier.

We too have had to trust in one sacrifice, Jesus, the Lamb of God, given that my, your, all our wrongdoings can be paid for so that we and God might be reconciled.

But what we have here is that wonderful picture, a pattern of what it is that God does when he saves his people. He deals with the problems of sin and his judgment, he protects his people and he calls them to live as his people.

And with God's people reconciled with him ruling as their sovereign Lord, we see the fruit of that reconciliation with God's good rule through his appointed prophet and the beauty of what that entails.

So let's move on to our final point, God's good rule, in verses 12 to 17. 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.

[24 : 36] 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. 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. Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life, and he went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah, and he judged Israel in all these places.

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. Here we see a beautiful picture of what it means to be reputable to God.

We see a picture of his glorious promises fulfilled. God's people, numerous but beyond measure, together in relationship with God. God is their king, and they're accepting his rule.

God's people in the land he has promised them with his appointed leader to speak his words to them and to guide them. God's people at peace with those around them, protected by God himself.

[25 : 53] God's people in the land for us, of course, it's a great glimpse, isn't it, of that glorious future promises that we look forward to, the promise of heaven for all who turn to trust in his Son.

Not a promise of rest from the hard struggles of life today. After all, Israel, for those who know the Old Testament, certainly did not truly have that, but rather a small taster, a small glimpse of the pattern that God has set.

And for the people at the time, Samuel put up a stone as a memorial of their reliance on the one true sovereign God, and as a call to keep relying on him in the future, to know that God is good.

The writer of 1 Samuel has given us the same with this account, hasn't he? And let's remember the sovereign Lord who raises up and brings low, who guards the feet of his faithful ones, and who judges the ends of the earth.

Let us remember him and keep turning back to him every day of our lives. Amen. Let me just pray.

[26 : 58] Father, we thank you for this time to hear you speak to us. Please, Father, convict us of our reliance on you and your rule and your generosity to us.

please help us to live repentant lives as the Israelites were called to. Please help us to live, Father, looking to that rule of yours and that good future we have with your Son forever.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.