

The Return of the Prophet

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[0 : 00] Amen. Lots of all the extra books that go along with it.

If I can find an excuse to talk about it, I will, which is why I'm talking about it now. Because I now have an excuse. But there's something that if you've only ever watched the films, which are great, I love them too.

If you've only ever watched the films and not read the books, there's a small detail that is missing right at the beginning of the story. If we know the story well. So Bilbo has left the Shire. He's left the ring behind and he's gone off to find adventure in Rivendell. Gandalf is worried about what is really going on with the ring. So he goes off to investigate and he leaves Frodo by himself. Now in the movies, this period of time between Gandalf leaving and going and discovering what the ring actually is, doesn't feel like a long time. You think, oh, maybe he was away a year at the most, maybe two years.

[1 : 23] But it doesn't feel like a lot of time has passed. But if you read the books, you find out that actually 17 years passes in this space of time.

Some of those who are here or were here this morning aren't even 17 years old yet. So for many of the children in this church, that's their whole lifetime plus a little bit extra that has passed between these two events in the book, which are covered really quickly in the films.

Sometimes when we read the Bible, the passage of time is only mentioned very briefly. You have to really stop and focus on what's being written to understand how much time has passed.

And sometimes we're not even given a length of time. We're simply told things like later or at another time. We're not given a length of time. Here, though, we are told that 20 years has passed. 20 years since the last word we had of Samuel, which was way back in chapter 4 and verse 1, which simply says that the word of Samuel had passed.

[2 : 35] Sorry, that the word of the Lord, the word of Samuel had come to all Israel. And it says that 20 years had passed back in verse 2. So we didn't actually read that verse, but it says it there that 20 years has passed.

And in those 20 years, an awful lot has happened. Eli and his sons have died, as the prophet had said that they would. The wars against the Philistines had not been going so well.

So the people of Israel made a pretty horrendous decision. They made it a decision to take the Ark of God out from the temple, out of the tabernacle at Shiloh, and to march it off into battle.

They did this hoping that its presence would grant them victory over their enemies. But they quickly learned that that is not how God works.

The Ark of God, the Ark of the Covenant, was not some kind of lucky charm. They couldn't use it and abuse it in that way. Israel is defeated in this battle.

[3 : 43] The Ark is captured. Eli's sons are killed, and then Eli himself later dies. It is possible, too, that Shiloh itself is destroyed soon after, because we never really hear much about it again.

And we hear that Eli's descendants instead move to Nob, rather than stay in Shiloh. Israel had lost a great battle.

They had suffered a great defeat. Not only had many men been killed and their army defeated, but the Ark of God had fallen into enemy hands.

It was a great tragedy for the people. So the Philistines are ecstatic with themselves. They think they've won this great victory against not only Israel, but against their God.

So they take the Ark, back to their capital in Ashdod, and they place the Ark in the temple of Dagon. This was a sign that their God had had victory over Israel, that their God was supreme, that their God was all-powerful.

[4 : 48] He just couldn't let that stand. He causes the statue of Dagon in the temple to topple and to break, and for seven months he causes plagues and disturbances wherever the Ark is taken, as the Philistines pass it around and around, trying to avoid destruction.

Eventually the Philistines give up, and they try to send the Ark back. But they do so in such a way to prevent it as much as possible, and yet it still makes its way back to Israel, along with a sizable tribute of gold.

And then the Ark remains in Kiriath-Jerim, until David later takes it to Jerusalem. In those 20 years. It may be easier to imagine that the whole issue of leadership, the whole question about who will lead this nation, had gone away. After all, a long time had passed. But that is not as we shall see the case.

So there's three things we're going to look at tonight from 1 Samuel chapter 7. We're going to look at a call to repentance, a call to worship and pray, and a call to blessing.

[6 : 03] So firstly then we have a call to repentance. We read then in 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 Ashtaroath 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 Ashtaroath, and they serve the Lord only. If you were to read the chapter 4 to 6, one of the striking things that you'll notice is the complete absence of Samuel.

At the end of chapter 3, the beginning of chapter 4, he has just been established and named as God's prophet. We hear that the word of God was coming to him, that he was preaching, that he was ministering to people, that he had taken over from Eli, who had now died.

But then there is no mention of him for the next 20 years. All that business with the ark that we quickly looked at just now, nothing, not a peep.

It's only at the end of this 20-year gap, of this 20-year time of suffering, that Israel appears to actually finally be seeking the Lord again.

[7 : 30] And it is now when Samuel decides to reveal himself in this way. No doubt he was going around and ministering to the people.

No doubt word of him was spreading. No doubt the miraculous return of the ark to God's people after a devastating defeat had made me begin to rekindle people's desire for the God of their fathers, the God who delivered them from slavery and given them the land in which they now dwelt. This cycle, the cycle of falling away from God, of coming under oppression, of then looking back to God, is exactly the same thing we see throughout the book of Judges.

The book of Judges may be over, we may be into a new chapter, but they are still in the same situation. One last judge yet remains, and that is to be Samuel.

So after a kind of quiet 20 years, during which he was still no doubt working very hard for God, he was not in center stage.

[8 : 45] It could be he was traveling around Israel, preaching and evaluating where the nation was at. Maybe he was waiting to see if Israel was repentant, waiting to see if that repentance was real, that it was true.

And now it seems we've reached the stage where they are repentant, and it is a real repentance. And Samuel now sees that, so he now comes before the people.

He makes his grand return and prepares them for what they must do. We looked this morning at how there's a difference between real faith and just like an outward pretend faith.

Well, there is a difference between true repentance and just outward repentance. Because like real faith, real repentance requires action.

It doesn't require simply looking the part or sounding it. People can sound pretty penitent when they want to be.

[9 : 56] They can sound like they're sorry. You can put on a bit of a facade, can you? Suppose if any of you have got children, you'll recognize this instantly when they say they're sorry. When you know they're really not, they just say that because they know it gets them out of trouble.

If you ever went to go and rob a bank, which I do not recommend you do, but if you ever went to go and rob a bank, you would wear a disguise, wouldn't you?

You would put something over your face. You would cover it. You would hide who you really were from the people there because you wouldn't want people to see who it was that was robbing the

bank.

You wouldn't want people to identify you and say, aha, it was him. I saw him do it. He committed the crime. You put on a persona. You put on a face that isn't your own.

You hide yourself from people's eyes. This is outward repentance. It's like this. You're putting on a disguise. You're putting on a face that isn't your own.

[10:58] You're making sure you look the part on the outside, but behind the mask, nothing has changed. Samuel had to be sure that the repentance was real.

And with real repentance comes real action. And Samuel speaks to the people. He said, if you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the astrophs from among you and direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines.

Samuel is saying, if you are truly meaning what you say, then now is the time to prove it. You need to get rid of these false gods you've been worshipping.

You need to do away with them. Do not look to them anymore. Do not turn to the fake gods, the dead gods. Instead, put them away and turn to the real, the living, and the true God, your God.

Look to the Lord. Look to him, and he will deliver you from your enemy. Turn to the real, true, living God, and he will save you.

[12:16] This is the gospel, isn't it, friends? This is salvation. If you want to be saved, if you want to be delivered, your sin, if you want peace in your life, then do not look to false gods.

Do not look to false promises of happiness or of joy. Instead, look to God. Because God alone grants salvation.

God listens to his people's cry. God forgives when we ask him for it. True repentance brings action. Israel was told to put away their false gods. And when writing for the Thessalonians, he praises them for doing this very same thing. He says in 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so we need not say anything.

For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and the true God.

[13:33] In Thessalonica, these new converts, these brand new Christians had repented. And part of that repentance meant putting away their...

The gods had probably worshipped their entire lives. They were now... This action was so bold, so earth-shattering in the Greco-Roman world in which they lived, that word of this change, word of this rejection of their idols had spread.

They had become infamous. Just think, how could they do such a thing? How could they turn away from the gods of their ancestors? How could they turn away from the gods of their people?

Today, our idols are a little bit different. We don't have statues made of wood or stone or gold or whatever.

We do not believe in other gods in the same way that the old pagan world did. We don't have big temples where we go and sacrifice to this god or that god or give money to this priest or whatever.

[14:53] We don't have idols like that, but they are there. We instead tend to worship other things in our time.

The biggest thing is we tend to worship ourselves. We tend to think that we are the greatest person ever to have lived. That my happiness trumps everybody else. That I can be whatever I want to be. It doesn't matter who gets hurt along the way. That I can be the best me I can ever possibly be. We also tend to worship things like wealth and power and prestige.

Even sometimes we worship good things like family. There are all sorts of things that can be our idols today. Things that can ensnare our hearts today.

But if we were to walk away from these idols, if we were to give them up, if we were to put them away and instead turn to the living and the true God as Israel was being called to do, as the Thessalonians did, then would that create the same shock in our world that it would have done in the ancient world?

[16:06] Would we make the drastic changes that Samuel is causing Israel to do? Another thing that true repentance brings, it brings with it worship, and it brings with it prayer, which is our second heading then, a call to worship and to pray.

The people had gathered in great numbers. You may recall recently the photos and the news footage from the recent Jubilee celebrations. The great multitudes of people gathered in front of Buckingham Palace, hoping to see the Queen and her family on that balcony.

People came from all over the country, all over the world, to be there in that place at that moment, at this great point in history. Well, in Israel, people had come from all over to Mizpah, a small town in the land of Benjamin, whose name means a place of watching.

So it may have been a place where you could see lots of land around it. It was a place where people would gather before the days of the monarchy.

What would have gathered there? Samuel. They gathered there to hear. They gathered there to hear their judge, who would speak to them and tell them what it was they had to do.

[17:42] And Samuel had called the people there so that he might pray for them. Here Samuel adds another title to his name. He now becomes their intercessor.

He prays to God on their behalf. And Israel desperately needed an intercessor. They desperately needed someone to pray for them on their behalf, because they had broken their side of the covenant.

They had offended God. They had broken their relationship with him. Excuse me. But they knew now that their suffering that they had endured was a direct result of their actions.

But unfortunately, they were in a position where they couldn't fix it by themselves. They could not pray for themselves.

Maybe they no longer knew how. They'd been so separated from God for so long, they were a complete loss as to what to do. So Samuel prays for them.

[18:49] And then something unusual happens. The people were told, draw water and then pour it out before the Lord. This is something that isn't seen anywhere else in the Bible.

It's a unique event to 1 Samuel chapter 7. So people can't ensure as to what this event means.

While this particular act is unique, the theme of pouring out is quite common in Scripture.

It's often associated with times of mourning or times of sorrow. You can look at Psalm 62 or Lamentations chapter 2 for examples of this. So it could have been perhaps a kind of collective demonstration of Israel's great sorrow or of Israel's great mourning for their self-inflicted troubles.

Showing God how sorry they really were. Kind of like a mass shedding of tears. It could also symbolize something like a mass ritual cleansing.

Trying to kind of wash away the sin of the people. Because all of them had sinned and all of them shared in this guilt together. Or perhaps it means both of these.

[20:04] We're not 100% sure. Sure. So the people gathered. And once Samuel had prayed for them, what did they do next? They themselves pray.

They fasted. An act which is often accompanied with prayer and were told that they pray. Initially they needed Samuel to do what they could not.

But now the people are able to pray for themselves. And what was it that they said? What was their prayer? We have sinned against the Lord.

It was a prayer of repentance. They repented of their sin and they confessed it to their God in prayer. And then they would ask Samuel to keep praying for them.

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 Philistine. And this is a duty that Samuel does not take lightly.

[21:07] He has almost become Israel's de facto leader at this point. But his primary purpose is to be their spiritual guide and teacher. Later on in chapter 12, we hear just how seriously he took this duty of prayer.

He says in chapter 12, verse 23, Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you.

And I will instruct you in the good and right way. It's an important duty that Samuel had to pray for his people.

And it's the same duty that any minister or any church leader or elder has too, to pray and teach those who are under their care. It's a very sacred and important task that should never be neglected.

We're told then a bit more about the Philistines. How the Philistines started getting a little bit nervous. They heard this great gathering of Israel and so they decided to strike.

[22 : 14] They decided to attack them. Again, we're not sure why they decided to attack at this moment in time. It could have been they suspected this gathering was perhaps a new army.

All 20 years had passed. That was time enough for new soldiers to be trained, for people to grow up and become old enough to fight. It was long enough for an army to be built.

Or perhaps they saw an opportunity. Maybe they knew it was a gathering of civilians, of people who weren't ready for a fight and they thought now's a good opportunity to strike and wipe out a massive amount of the people of Israel while they were vulnerable.

Either way, Israel was instantly being tested. Their new, re-found faith was instantly put on trial.

Now they face the same threat they had faced 20 years ago. would they make the same bad decisions as they had then which resulted in the ark being lost and the army defeated.

[23 : 23] Now we hear though that their response is very different. We read 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 defeated before Israel.

Last time when the people marched against the Philistines they were filled with pride and arrogance thinking that simply their superiority or having the ark of God with them would give them victory.

Back then it was the Philistines who were afraid and yet they were the ones who prevailed. But now things have changed. Now it's the people of Israel that are afraid.

It's the Philistines who appear prideful and arrogant. And instead of trying to manipulate God by taking the ark into battle they instead turn to God in worship and petition him for deliverance.

[24 : 43] Unable to save themselves they instead throw themselves upon the mercy of God asking him to save them. So Samuel makes an offering. He makes an offering to the Lord.

He asks for the Lord's favour. However this is an act of worship an act of praise in which the whole of the people of Israel are currently taking part.

I don't think every single person from around the nation was there but representatives certainly from all over the land were there I'm sure and they were all collectively now worshipping God and asking for him to deliver them.

Israel had been away from God for a while now. We are aware though that some had remained faithful even through all this time. We know that because we see Elkanah and his family and Hannah Samuel's mother we saw that they were faithful to God that they did the right thing. But on the whole Israel had left God and gone after other false gods. But now God had spoken he had spoken to Samuel on the day of his calling and things had changed.

[25 : 59] The word of God had returned to the people and had changed them. So now the whole of Israel is united together in worship together.

And with Samuel leading the way they pray and they sacrifice and they worship and they ask for deliverance.

an enemy army is quickly approaching them an enemy is threatening to interrupt this act of worship and yet they do not flee they do not run away they do not stop they continue.

At this moment in time they are completely trusting in God to deliver them from their enemies but also to deliver them on his terms to defeat them how he sees fit rather than how they see fit.

And like his mother before him Samuel cries out to God Lord God save your people. The Philistines were drawing near perhaps now they were within sight Lord God save your people.

[27 : 13] We don't exactly know what Samuel said but I don't imagine it was too far away from that. As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering the Philistines drew near to attack Israel it says in verse 10 but the Lord thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion and they were defeated before Israel.

The people prayed Samuel cried out and the Lord answered them. The Lord we're told thundered with a mighty sound. We don't quite know what that means but whatever it was it was such an amazing event that it was enough to disrupt this army to throw them into confusion to terrify them to frighten them.

They turned and fled and the people were saved. They were delivered. Right away their new found convictions were tested.

He didn't have time to learn and to grow. It happened straight away. We're told that they stuck to their guns and God delivered them.

Friends, trusting in God is hard. It was hard for them as they saw their enemies fastly approaching and it's hard for us today. It's hard because we cannot see what he is doing.

[28 : 40] Sometimes we can't even see it after he has done it. Sometimes it only clicks later what it is that God has done for us. Sometimes it takes years before we realize how God has worked for us, how he has delivered us throughout our lives.

But it is hard because we cannot see what he sees. We cannot know what he knows. repentance. We have a call to repentance, a call to worship and praying and finally we have a call to blessing. There's a sequence that appears here throughout this passage. We start with an act of repentance. This act of repentance leads to confession. This confession leads to a recommitment and this recommitment leads to blessing.

these really are gospel principles. Remember the words of John the Baptist, words that Jesus later echoed himself, repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Repentance is key. Repentance leads to confession of sin, which then leads to commitment to God who takes that sin away and then drives us to worship him and leads us to his blessing.

[30 : 04] To Israel in Samuel's day, this blessing was to be delivered from an impending attack by the greatest foe. Then the Lord took up a stone, no sorry, 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. Their blessing was safety from their enemies.

A great army had been defeated. A battle had been won not by military might or strategy or overwhelming tactics.

an army had been defeated by God and him alone. God was faithful to his people and he saved them.

What about our blessings today? How does God bless us? Samuel is a prophet, a priest, and a judge in this passage, an intercessor too, as we had looked at.

[31 : 26] And these offices, this example of Samuel points us towards a greater prophet, a greater priest, a greater judge, and a king, an intercessor, Jesus Christ.

Samuel offered sacrifices for his people and then interceded for them on their behalf. But Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice and is now interceding on our behalf before God himself.

The Lord God heard and answered Samuel. Samuel was a prophet, yes, but he was still just a man. How much more then can we be assured that he would answer the call of his own beloved son? Israel owed their salvation as a nation to God. He alone delivered them from the Philistines. They owed God their lives.

How much more do we owe our salvation on God who gave the life of his son to pay for it?

[32 : 42] We owe not only our earthly lives but also our eternal lives. Israel was a called out people. They were a separated nation.

They were a holy nation that God had chosen and we too are a called out people. We are a blessed people because God is faithful to his children and he will deliver them from evil.

We are blessed because God is with us through our trials because he comforts us in our grief.

Because he knows what we're going through.

God blesses us by being our strength. When our own strength fails, we feel like we've got nothing left to give, when we're just limping along, just waiting for that moment where we're going to collapse.

God is there to lift us up, to dust us off and carry us along, if that's what it takes. If you're a Christian tonight, then that is your God.

[34 : 00] That is what he has done for you. He is your father. He loves you. He'd do anything for you. He gave his son for you.

But if you are not, and this sounds like something you like, maybe you're tired, maybe you've had enough of trying to fight your own battles and being defeated again and again, maybe your life has been tiring, there seems to be no end to the suffering you're facing, you just don't know where to turn, there just seems to be no hope, there's no joy.

If that's how you feel, then follow Israel's example. Repent, turn away from and confess your sin to God, commit yourself to Jesus today, ask him for his help, and you will be greatly blessed.

your life will not be freed from trouble, we never make that promise because it's not true. In many cases, being a Christian will bring your life more trouble, but you can be assured that you'll never face these troubles alone.

And all the troubles we'll face in this world, all the trials, all the suffering, all the temptations, will seem like a blink of an eye. when we find ourselves in glory before God himself, and we're able to worship him for all eternity.

[35 : 48] That's how we are blessed. And we're blessed because God loves us.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this account of your people, how they turned away from evil, how they confessed and repented their sin before you, how they recommitted their lives to you, and how you saved and delivered them and blessed them.

Lord, we pray that as we see this gospel example in the Old Testament, we would live the gospel in our own lives. we thank you for Jesus Christ, who in every way is greater than Samuel, who is God incarnate, who is the greatest priest, who is the greatest judge, who is the greatest intercessor, who is the greatest king, the king of kings, the Lord of lords, who died for us.

We thank you who was risen again from the dead and how he is by your side right now. We thank you how he cares for us, how through the valley of the shadow of death in which we all will walk through, he is with us.

We thank you that when we find ourselves down in the depths, he will reach in and pull us out. We thank you that he will deliver us from our enemies.

[37 : 31] we thank you that he will save us because we cannot do it ourselves. Oh Lord, help us tonight, teach us how to pray, guide us in our lives, and be with us through it all.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. forth. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.