

Israel's Last Judge

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 0 0] Our God and Father, we are gathered in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. We are very anxious to hear your word, that is, the word from you for us, and we are very aware that there is a danger that we might hear it and not do it.

So grant that we may both hear and do your word, by the operating of your Holy Spirit in our hearts and lives. We ask in Jesus Christ's name. Amen.

Amen. I was asked to say a special hello to all the members of this congregation in the infant nursery over in the hall who are listening attentively, I'm sure, to the system.

It's very nice to be here. I guess that's about all I can say.

I'll fill in details if you want to know. From the Vancouver Sun yesterday morning, Canada is, this is the lead article at the top of the first page, Canada is a nation torn by change.

[1 : 4 3] Despite our differences, Canadian attitudes reflect a mature people who feel responsible for improving the world, who place duty ahead of rights and self-understanding above riches.

But we have lost the trust in many institutions from the government to the legal system. We are a country with two sets of rules, one for the rich and another for the poor.

Some institutions still inspire trust. That is, churches and schools were named as such by three-quarters of those polled.

It's interesting that this statement is the prophetic utterance of Angus Reid polls.

That's, we substitute them for Samuel in our society to tell us where we are and what we're doing.

[2 : 5 8] The, there they represent kind of a prophetic voice in our day, about which I have some uncertainties.

Tomorrow is Canada Day. And so we are in the happy circumstance this morning in looking at 1 Samuel, chapter 7, on page 244 of your Pew Bible, of looking at the story of a nation that is fragmented and blown apart and seeing how under God's grace and by His sovereignty they are brought together.

Not by the contemplation of the most recent poll, but by the ministry God gave to Samuel.

Now, to help you through the chapter, because lots of people get confused by references which may or may not be significant.

Israel, remember, is the nation named after Jacob, and God gave Jacob the name Israel. There were in that nation 12 tribes named after the 12 sons of Jacob.

[4 : 2 7] That they, there were as well many other tribes, the Amorites and the Philistines and the Zophites and the Jebusites, and you can go on almost indefinitely.

Because it was a rich agricultural land, tribes came in and staked out some of the land and were prepared to fight for it. These tribes had their centers in cities, as they called them, though we would probably not think of them as such, where they carried on their religious activities, gathered for their military preparedness, and did their marketing one with another.

So, that was Israel. So, that was Israel. And it wasn't a, it wasn't a, it wasn't a, a consolidated, confederated, and constituted 12 province country like the one you're used to.

It was much more sort of a hand to mouth kind of nation, where the people who were victorious at the moment were in charge. The Baals were the ancient gods of the Phoenicians, revived, because when a people move away from God, they move to the old gods.

And you know how our country is, is massively filled with the revival of old gods of nature and gods of all sorts of kinds are being brought out to try again, see if they worked and whether we dismiss them too soon in life.

[6 : 12] So, that's what was happening here. They had gone back to the Baals and the Ashtoreth. And the, the, the, the, the Ashtoreth was, the, the senior goddess was there among the Baals.

The, the chief Baal was male. And so, they, the, the, the religion of, of Israel was caught up with Baal and Ashtoreth.

And they were male and female. There's two, there's two important three-letter words in our world. One is G-O-D, which is God. And one is S-E-X, which is sex.

And when you move away from one free three-letter word, you generally move in the direction of the other. And you see that happening in our society that because religion is profoundly related to our sexuality, so that when we go off-center in our religion, we generally go in the direction of some kind of passionate sexual expression of our deepest feelings.

And that's what was happening there as it happens here. Mizpah, which was a tower, and which was the site of an ancient covenant, though nobody's quite sure where it was or whether there was more than one of them.

[7 : 45] But it had the wonderful statement between Jacob and his father-in-law, neither of whom trusted each other very much, that the Lord watched between you and me while we are absent one from another.

And that's the word Mizpah. I don't know why my grandparents had it put in their wedding ring. Seems a prudent thing to do, really.

But that was Mizpah, and that's where the center of activity in Chapter 7. The Philistines were a sea people who had developed the ability to forge iron into steel and make weapons.

And so they had a significant advantage in their technology over the Israelites, which they used to put down the Israelites and to conquer land easily.

And they were a very warlike tribe amongst the Israelites. Ebenezer, I'll come to later. The Ekron and Gath are cities of the Philistines.

[9 : 01] The Amorites, who are referred to, should be thought of perhaps as a kind of aboriginal tribe that lived in the same part of the world. So that's the mix into which Chapter 7 is to be read.

Now, if you look at Chapter 7 on page 244, you will see that it begins with Samuel summoning the whole house of Israel and calling them to return to the Lord with all their hearts and rid themselves of foreign gods and the actuals of Israel.

And commit ourselves to the Lord and serve him only. And he will deliver you out of the hands of the Philistines. And so the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths and serve the Lord only.

That's what happened. We have a philosophy of things get better and better. The Bible tends to think that people left to themselves get worse and worse.

And there has to be a renewal time every so often to bring people back. And that that pattern is established in our lives, too. Things don't get better and better.

[10 : 20] They tend to go downhill. And there has to be some process of renewal. And basically, that's what you're doing here this morning. And the very best possible investment you could make of this morning is to be here.

Not because the sermon is very good or anything else, but because there is the opportunity to see how God among us by his word and spirit is able to bring you to a place of renewal.

And that's what was happening to the nation in Judges chapter 7. So he gathered the people together.

And in verse 6, if you look, when they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord. That was the that was the probably like Jean Begg and her little puppet.

He had visual aids in that he had a great jar of water and water was very precious and it was poured out on the ground. And that pouring out is the represented the people pouring out their hearts before the Lord.

[11 : 38] And it's a very difficult thing to do, you know, to pour out your heart.

It's a wonderful grace to be given that you could do it. That all the frustration and all the anxiety and all the jealousies and all the misunderstandings and all the things that go in to make up the sort of complex reality at the center of our being.

That there could be that there could be that there could be that there could be a place where all your past failures and everything could be poured out before the Lord. That you could do that. That you could find even in this week, as I long to find, a time and a place and an opportunity where you could, like this jar of water was poured out before the people, you could pour out your heart.

Before the Lord. Before the Lord. And all that is in it. Maybe somebody could help you with it though. It's hard to find somebody you could trust enough to do that. But, but you, we need to come to that place.

And the nation needed to come to that place. And Samuel knew it. And when the people gathered, the water was poured out. And if you look at what happened then, you'll see that on that day they fasted and they confessed, we have sinned against the Lord.

[13 : 13] You know, we live in a world which is made up almost entirely of people saying, you have sinned against me. But what a wonderful thing it would be if we had, if we as a company of people, instead of, you know, storing up that sense of having been sinned against, we've come to the place where we, in fasting and in prayer, could acknowledge that we have sinned against the Lord.

It would be a, it would be a wonderful gift to be given. And that seems to be the gift that God gave to these, to these people through Samuel.

And, and you see, the wonderful thing about these things, to this, to these sort of nomadic tribes wandering around after their herds and fighting with one another and constantly pillaging one another and doing terrible things to one another and having terrible things done to them.

And in the midst of all this, they were given a judge by God, a leader who would stand up and draw them all together.

And he's the last of the judges. And you can read the story of Deborah and Barak and Gideon and Samson and all those whom God gave to the people and gave them special gifts and enduements of his Holy Spirit that the people might gather together around him and through him come back into relationship to the Lord.

[15 : 04] And that's, that's, that's what happened. And that's what's happening here. That God is taking this fragmented nation whose every religious center, holy place had been corrupted by the immorality of the priests themselves.

And that's, this people who, uh, uh, uh, had misused the ark of God, which was to mark the presence of God among them and had gone on in darkness and disobedience and revived the ancient gods.

And that's, God sends them this man and he gathers them all together. And what do they do? They pour out their hearts before the Lord with fasting and with prayer.

And, uh, and they recognize that God has given them a leader, Samuel. Well, inevitably when that happens, as you see, uh, as you start to pray, the enemy starts to move in.

Amen. And so they were gathered together and the Philistines saw that happening. And so they came in for the kill. And, uh, and that's, uh, that's not unusual.

[16 : 22] I don't think, uh, the Philistines had scourged these people for many years and now they were there to do it again. And so as they gathered together in prayer, uh, the Philistines moved in.

I just thought of something. Get your prayer book out for you. I just, uh, as we went through it this morning, I was impressed by the call it for peace.

That it sort of, it's, it fits into this context and maybe helps you to understand why we say it. But this might be in, in some ways, the, the prayer that they were praying.

Oh, on page 11, you know. Oh God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom.

You see, and right in the midst of that, he says, defend us, thy humble servants, in all assaults of our enemies. That we surely trusting in thy defense may not fear the power of our adversaries through the might of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

[17 : 43] Well, this is a context in which that prayer could be said and understood that as they prayed, the enemies gathered in with the coming of the enemies. These fear gripped their hearts.

When the fear gripped their hearts, then they knew they had to have help. And so, uh, in verse eight, you'll see that's what happened. They said to Samuel, don't stop crying out to the Lord, our God for us, that he may rescue us from the hands of the Philistines.

So what did Samuel do? Well, Samuel took a suckling lamb and in a kind of fulfillment of a priestly office, he was a judge, he was a prophet, he was a priest.

He offered that to the Lord. A whole burnt offering. And this whole burnt offering was to represent the whole people giving their whole hearts to the wholehearted service of the Lord.

That's what it represented. That's what it represented. Here we are with the enemy moving in around us. And we give ourselves to the Lord wholeheartedly. And, uh, Samuel did that even as the Philistines moved in.

[19 : 10] He cried out to the Lord on Israel's behalf and the Lord answered him. See, it's an amazing picture, isn't it? And so in verse 10, you read, while Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle.

But that day the Lord thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such panic that they were routed before Israel, before the Israelites.

The Israelites had the cold hand of fear on their hearts. And the Lord, by some miraculous intervention, some thunderous voice spoke.

And the fear was moved from the Israelites to the Philistines. And the Philistines scattered in confusion. And we find the Israelites going after them and, uh, pursuing them and slaughtering them all the way to Bethkar.

You see the reversal that had taken place. The feared enemy now became the fearful enemy. And, uh, were utterly defeated. And because that happened, then, if you look on, you see that how Samuel took advantage of that moment to remind the people and to establish a reminder.

[20 : 44] In verse 12, he took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shun. And he called it Ebenezer. Thus far has the Lord helped us.

Which is probably a good habit for you to develop. To set up, in a sense, permanent memorials at certain places along your life's journey. Which remind you that up to that point, the Lord has helped you.

And on the basis of that experience, you can face the future knowing that the Lord who helped you there will continue to help you. And that's why Samuel set up the stone called Ebenezer.

That again is why you're here this morning. To be reminded that the Lord who has helped you up to this point will, no matter what circumstances, crowd in upon you.

He will continue to help you. And that's the faith to which Samuel directed these people. Well, the result of that was that the, you see in beginning in verse 13.

[22 : 03] The Philistines were subdued throughout Samuel's lifetime. The hand of the Lord was against the Philistines. The towns of the Philistines were captured again by Israel.

And the neighboring territory was taken from them. And there was peace between Israel and the peoples, the Amorites.

And also you get the picture of, as the chapter ends in verse 15 following, Samuel continued as judge, the God-given judge, who was to bring justice to the people at the domestic level of their lives, as well as the national level of their lives, at the personal level of their lives.

God saw Samuel continued as judge over Israel all the days of his life. From year to year he went on circuit, from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah, judging Israel in all those places, bringing justice to the people where they were.

That's one of the things the sun says Canada doesn't have. At the most intimate and personal level, there isn't justice.

[23 : 27] And you know how corrosive that is to a nation. Well, Samuel continued to bring justice. And always he went back to Ramah from which he had come.

And there he also judged Israel. And he built an altar to the Lord. Well, you see, you've heard of Independence Day.

Is that the Fourth of July? Well, what we need as a country, if you look at Judges chapter 7, it's not Independence Day. We need Dependence Day.

That we are utterly dependent on the Lord our God. And he alone can give us the victory. And he alone can sustain us. And he alone can raise up the leadership we need.

And we need to be utterly dependent upon him. As it were, to pour out our hearts before him in confession. To make of ourselves a whole offering of our whole selves.

[24 : 33] The whole nation, in a sense, giving itself to the Lord. And recognizing our dependence upon him. When we see in our nation, the breakdown into tribalism.

The breakdown that's on the national level. Filtering down into family levels. Filtering down into personal levels.

All that breakdown happening at every level of our society. And so what a nation needs is a gathering together.

And this pouring out of our hearts before God. In repentance. And a prayer to God in whom alone is our strength. You see, this is not just a pattern for individuals.

It's not just that you in your life and I in my life need to find a place of repentance. You need to join in that sacrifice of the whole burnt offering to God.

[25 : 50] Which is Christ's crucifixion for us. And he wholly giving himself to us. That we may wholly give ourselves to him. That's at the personal level.

That that needs to happen. And that out of our hearts is taken the fear by which we live. And in the place is given us an Ebenezer.

A reminder that the Lord has helped us hitherto. And he will continue to help us. And we can continue to trust him. And that the place most precious for us.

In our lives. Is a place of repentance. A place of self-offering. To the one who offered himself for us. And a going on in the faith.

That he who has helped us will continue to help us. As we come to Canada Day tomorrow.

[26 : 54] We are reminded. I am reminded. Just check this out. Hope it will be for your good. Turn to Psalm 72. In your prayer book.

In your prayer book. It's on page 418. This caught the eye of one of the fathers of confederation.

But on the eve of Canada Day. Let's say it once again. You are with me. Let his dominion. Let his dominion. Hello. Let his dominion. Let his dominion.

Also be. From sea to sea. And from the river. Unto the world's end. That. Stop. I don't want you to go any further.

But you know that that is the motto of our country. And that our country is not one in which we strive to take dominion.

[27 : 58] We seek to be under the dominion of our Lord and our God. That was the original idea. We are aspiring now to sort of take dominion over our circumstances.

And we're doing a very poor job. And whether we publicly can subscribe to this or not. The reality which must be there.

And which can by God's grace be there. Is that our God will have dominion. That he will be Lord from sea to sea. In all the circumstances of our life as a nation.

As we individually see. That he should be Lord in all the circumstances of our personal lives. The wonder you see of this chapter is.

That God raised up Samuel. When the nation didn't deserve it. That God raised him up and he called them back. Into relationship to God.

[29 : 04] And so God raises up those. When we least deserve it. And brings us back into relationship to God. Where we allow him to have dominion in our lives.

Amen.