

## Here I Raise My Ebenezer

I Samuel 7:3-17

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

Now turn with me once again to I Samuel. Tonight, in the seventh chapter we'll be reading from the third verse — actually we'll begin to read at the second verse of chapter seven and through to the end of the chapter. You'll remember that the ark of the covenant has finally made its way back to Israel once again, carried on a cart with two milk cows who have just given birth to two calves. They've made it to Beth-Shemesh; the folks at Beth-Shemesh didn't want the ark there because God came down and once again struck.... In verse 19 of the previous chapter, He struck "seventy men of them, and the people mourned because the Lord had struck the people with a great blow." They had put not only the ark of the covenant but also these five golden mice and five golden tumors and apparently set it on a stone slab somewhere in the middle of a field, and it had become something of a tourist attraction, and God once again.... They've learned little from their previous experiences of the ark of the covenant, and finally it is taken to Kiriath-jearim where it will remain for twenty years. The last line that we read in our text last week at the end of verse 2, was that "all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord." They mourned after the Lord.

Well, we need to ask tonight, what does that lamenting or mourning amount to? And we're also going to ask another question tonight, because we sang it at the opening of our service this evening: "Here I raise my Ebenezer." I wonder if you've ever sung a line of a hymn for many, many years and not quite sure what it means. What does "here I raise my Ebenezer" mean?

Well, it comes of course from the passage that's before us tonight. A memorial stone, a stone of help. But it means more than that. It actually has a sting in its tail. Well, we'll pause and find out the answer to that sting in the tail a little later. But now before we read God's word together, let's look to God in prayer.

*Lord our God, we come to You. You are our everything, and without You we are nothing; we are bereft; life isn't worth living without You. Lord Jesus Christ, You are our great high priest; You are our prophet; You are our king; You are our friend; You make life worth living. You fill it with joy unspeakable and full of glory. You have turned our lives around from serving idols to serving the living God.*

*We thank You for the gift of Scripture. We thank You for the Bible. We thank You for all of its parts. Thank You for books of history and books of poetry, and books*

*called Gospel; and every part of it, every word of it, every jot and tittle of it to the least stroke of a pen is the product of Your out-breathing, and is therefore infallible, inerrant. Father, we pray tonight for the help of Your Spirit, the illumination of Your Spirit. This is all to no effect, no ultimate effect, no life-transforming effect, unless by Your Spirit You come and pour Your light into our darkened minds and hearts.*

*Help us, O Lord, tonight to truly fall in love with the word of God, for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Now verse 2 of I Samuel 7:

From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, 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 Israel, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the 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." So the people of Israel put away the Baal's and the Ashtaroth, 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 lords 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." 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-car.

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. 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.

And thus far, God's holy and inerrant word. May He add His blessing to the reading of it.

I Samuel 7 is in fact an important chapter in the books of I and II Samuel, just as II Samuel 7 is an important chapter. You understand all the chapters are important, but there's something especially significant about II Samuel 7. It's where you find the covenant that God makes with King David, but in I Samuel 7, you see peace restored to Israel. You see Samuel ruling not just as a prophet, but as judge. For twenty years Israel had been under the domination of the Philistines. Israel has been virtually in some kind of serfdom to the Philistines. You read later in chapter 13 and, I think, in chapter 10 of I Samuel, that the Philistines still retained some garrisoned cities in Israel. That would only last in the time of Samuel, but this is really the end of the Philistines. God brought a famous victory here. It was a victory of His own doing. It was a victory of His own sovereign intervention.

But for twenty years the ark of the covenant has remained in Kiriath-jearim, and we read at the end of verse 2, "...all of the house of Israel lamented after the Lord." They were sorrowful. They had every reason to be sorrowful. They had just suffered one of the worst defeats imaginable. Their most precious prize object, the ark of the covenant, representing as it did the very presence of God, containing the Ten Commandments...the Decalogue, Aaron's rod that budded. Later the Urim and Thummin would also be contained within this ark of the covenant. It was the symbol of God's presence. In an act of unmitigated folly they had taken it into battle and lost it. They have lost 34,000 men in battle because of this incident. They had every reason to lament. There were homes and towns and villages in Jerusalem and the surrounding district where grief and sorrow and pain still resided, you understand. There's going to be a general assembly called at a place called Mizpah. Samuel will call all of Israel to Mizpah, and there at Mizpah they will confess, "We have sinned against the Lord." But it's taken twenty years to make that confession.

Confessing one's sin, you understand, is not an easy thing. It doesn't come naturally to us to bow the knee, to bow our hearts, to acknowledge to our sovereign God that we are sinners deserving of wrath and condemnation; that all we can plead for is mercy. Twenty years. It will be through an act of God's great intervention that the Philistines will be finally routed.

I want us to see tonight three things.

## I. The need for God's mercy.

I want us to see first of all in verses 2-6, the need for mercy...the need for mercy. "We have sinned," they said. You see it there in verse 6, when they gather to Mizpah for this general assembly. "We have sinned." But the question I want us to think about tonight is what has brought about that confession. You remember Paul, in

II Corinthians 7, talks about two kinds of sorrow. He says in II Corinthians 7:10, there is such a thing as godly sorrow, but there's also such a thing as worldly sorrow. There's a godly sorrow and it leads to repentance, but there's a worldly sorrow. For twenty years they have been lamenting. For twenty years they have been sorrowful, but it was not a sorrow of repentance.

You notice the three things that Samuel says to them when he calls them to this general assembly at Mizpah. He says to them in verse 3, "If you are returning to the Lord..." and the word *returning* there in the Hebrew is one of these crucially important Hebrew words for repentance. "If you are returning...If you are *repenting*...If you are turning away from your sins and turning towards the Lord, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroah from among you and direct your heart to the Lord and serve Him only. Rid yourselves of your idols. Turn to the Lord and serve Him, and Him alone.

You remember from *The Westminster Confession* and the *Catechisms*, repentance always has that two-fold element to it, a turning away from sin and a turning towards the Lord. There's a negative and a positive. You must first of all turn away from your idols. It's hard to believe, isn't it? In spite of all that had happened in Israel, despite all the things that had happened with the ark, that for twenty years they still have their idols. They still have their representations of Ashtaroah and Baal. Now, Baal and Ashtaroah were Canaanite deities, you understand. They were "husband and wife" in the pantheon of Canaanite deities, and they were the gods of fertility. They were the gods of the weather, they were the gods of storm, and therefore the gods of fertile crops. Oh, isn't it interesting that when God teaches the Philistines a lesson, how does He do it but by sending a storm? Baal cannot so much as raise a rumble, and God thunders! Doesn't it remind you of Elijah on Mount Carmel, by the way? The Baal, who cannot so much as light a fire, and God comes down in fire and consumes that offering? So much for the power of these heathen deities! They still have their Baal's and Ashtaroah.

You understand, too, that Baal and Ashtaroah were associated with all kinds of sexual innuendo in Canaanite religion. The brothel and the temple in Canaanite religion were one and the same. Perhaps it isn't that difficult to understand then, why for twenty years they still retained their Baal's and Ashtaroah. And if you are serious, Samuel says, if you are serious about repentance, if you are serious

about seeking divine blessing and favor, you must get rid of your idols. You must turn away from your idols and serve the living God, as Paul says about the Thessalonian Christians, you remember.

“Oh, for a closer walk with God.” Do you remember that verse in that hymn?

“The dearest idol I have known,  
Whate’er that idol be,  
Help me to tear it from my breast  
and worship only Thee.”

My friends, we have to ask ourselves the question tonight, What is our idol? Do we have an idol? Is that the reason why God's blessing doesn't reside, perhaps, upon us? We need to ask that individually and we need to ask that corporately as a church. What are our idols? You see, we can't leave here tonight without facing that question. “Rid yourselves of your idols and turn to the Lord, and serve Him only.”

I was telling the ministers on Friday morning — as part of what Ligon asks me to do on a Friday morning, I often remind them of an anniversary that falls on that day. And on Friday it was the anniversary of Henry Martyn, the great missionary to India and then to Persia. And it was the 200th anniversary on Friday of the day that he arrived in India. And Henry Martyn, as some of you will well remember, had fallen in love with a beautiful young woman, Lydia Grenfell. The letters he wrote to her are among the sweetest, tenderest letters of love of a young man to a young woman that you could ever read. But he realized — and whether you agree with him or not is of no importance whatsoever — he felt (and “God alone is Lord of the conscience and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men”) — he felt that if he was going to be a missionary in India with the prospect (and as it turned out, the reality) that he would never be back in England again, that he could not get married. And I read to the ministers on Friday morning just a section of his diary where he records his final meeting with Lydia on the coastline, looking at the south England shoreline, and the heartbreak that when he said goodbye to her it would probably be for the last time in this world. They never married. They continued to write to each other for the rest of their lives, he in India and then in Persia, and she in England. But in that section that I read to the ministers on Friday morning, he refers to Lydia—the love of his life!—but he referred to her as his idol. She was his idol. And he felt he needed to “tear this idol from his breast and worship only Thee.”

Now, my dear friends, what's your idol tonight? You see, you cannot leave here tonight saying, “Well, that was nice. You know, I love a bit of history. You know, Derek, that was a pretty good sermon.” [You may say that was a poor sermon!] This text must rock your world, as young people say. It must challenge you to the very core of your being tonight. You see, you can listen to this and you can do what the Israelites did for twenty years.

You can lament and you can be sorry, and you can be sorry because of the mess. Lots of people are sorry about the mess of their lives. There's a worldly sorrow. There's a sorrow that comes because what you've done has backfired. We've all seen this, haven't we? Folk who have been caught, and the media have shown it on TV, and there's a sorrow — a terrible sorrow, an embarrassing sorrow. But it's not necessarily godly sorrow. It's a sorrow they've been caught. Their lives are in a mess, but it's not necessarily a turning to the Lord and serving Him only.

I'm asking you tonight, what is your idol? Can you identify your idol tonight? It's that to which you give more of your affections than you do to God. It's that which is more important to you than God and His word and His church. And, my friends, it could be your family. And it could be your status and position within the society. And it may be a hundred, a thousand other things tonight. But do you hear what Samuel is saying? If you are genuine about biblical repentance, you must rid yourselves of your idols and turn to the Lord and serve Him only. And there's a magnificent, overwhelming incentive to do that because every single person who does that God will never shun.

I remember one time...and let me put this as generically as I can. It wasn't in this country. I remember in my youthful ministry I did something or said something that was wholly inappropriate to an individual...an office bearer, as it turned out. I knew it immediately as it came out of my mouth, and it was too late. And you know the experience? It's tumbled out of your mouth and you're trying to get it back in, and it just won't go back in. There was nothing for it, and I had to get into the car, drive to this person's home, sit there shaking because I must now eat humble pie. I must apologize. I must say, "I am sorry. I'm sorry because I've offended you, but I'm sorry because I've offended God." I knocked on the door, and the door was promptly slammed in my face. They did not want to see me.

Sometimes we are fearful of saying to God, "I'm sorry. I am wholly, abjectly sorry for what I've done to You." And sometimes we're afraid to say that because we think that what we'll get is a slap in the face.

"Come unto Me, all ye that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." If you come to God with a genuine heart, He will never ever give you that cold shoulder.

## **II. The experience of God's mercy.**

Well, the second thing I want us to see here in verses 7-10, is the experience of God's mercy. Because as soon as the Philistines hear that Samuel has gathered this general assembly at Mizpah, the Philistines think the worst, of course, and they come. [The Philistines are always coming!] They read it of course as

revolution. They come with weapons, and the response of Israel...well, on one level it's pathetic, isn't it? When they hear that the Philistines are coming, they're afraid. Take heart, dear Christian, if you're easily afraid. You're not alone. Israel has been there many, many times. When Israel is threatened by her enemies, she is afraid. And what does she do? She calls for Samuel.

Doesn't this remind you, by the way, of the reading this morning in Isaiah 37, when on another occasion Hezekiah is locked up like a bird in a cage in Jerusalem, and Sennacherib is threatening him and all the population of Jerusalem. And what do they do? They call for Isaiah the prophet to do what? To pray.

Do you remember when Christian and Hopeful, after they've left Vanity Fair and Faithful has been martyred, and they come to a little section in the road, and the road is rough, and over to the left there's just a pleasant little meadow, and there's a stile — By-pass Meadow it's called. And they go over. And soon they find themselves in Doubting Castle where the owner is Giant Despair and his more malevolent wife. And they're locked up there and tortured there, and even to the point where they are contemplating taking their own lives. And then Christian remembers a key that he has in his pocket, and it's the key called All-Prayer that unlocks the gate of Doubting Castle.

Why is it, dear friends, that we so often think of prayer as the last resort? You know — “we've tried everything else, so let's try prayer.” God brings Israel to her knees. That's a wonderful thing. That's a great place to be, my friends. Maybe that's where you are tonight. God has brought you to a rough place. You're surrounded by your enemies. You don't know which way to turn. It may even be partly your own fault. You are beside yourself. You've come here to worship tonight and you're down and dejected and despondent, and you do not know which way to turn. And I'm telling you tonight the answer lies in this text!

“Have we trials and temptations?  
Is there trouble anywhere?  
You should never be discouraged;  
Take it to the Lord in prayer.”

I love — I absolutely love the end of verse 9: “And Samuel cried out to the Lord for Israel, and the Lord answered him.” Isn't that a beautiful thing? The Philistines are coming with their weapons, and Samuel cries out to the Lord, and the Lord answers him! It's a decisive moment in Israel's history.

It's saying to us...the Bible is saying to us again and again and again, and never seems to tire of saying it, the importance of prayer. Paul, in Ephesians 6, when he's describing the weapons of our warfare, tells us about the weapon of all prayer.

Let me remind you again of the absolute crucial importance of the church's prayer meeting. It's where the business of the church is done. It's where battles are fought and won at the throne of grace. I had a sweet, sweet letter in the mail in my box this afternoon from the Women In the Church. You are worth your weight in gold, or platinum, or whatever! Because this was just a little note to say you prayed for my mother, who'd been in hospital. I cannot tell you what that means to me, because there's power in prayer. There are some faithful praying warriors here in the church. Every time I hear the office bearers, the elders, at the end of every single session meeting praying for you — some of you by name, some of you individually.... You may never know it. The experience of God's mercy...and it comes through prayer.

### **III. The remembrance of God's mercy.**

Well, there's a third thing I want us to see, and it's the remembrance of God's mercy. Not only the need for God's mercy, not only the experience of God's mercy, but the remembrance of God's mercy. Because Samuel did something because he was a pastor. He knew the hearts of men and women. He knew what we are like. And do you know what we are like? We are forgetful. We are a forgetful people. We forget the Lord's mercies. And don't tell me that you don't, because every time you grumble and every time you complain you are forgetting the Lord's mercies here. So he set up this stone, *Even Haazer*, "the stone of help." So that every time they saw it, they would be reminded of God's remembrance, just like at baptism this morning. Every time you see a baptism, whether it's the baptism of a child or the baptism of a professing adult, it's a reminder that Jesus loves us. He loves us so much He's prepared to die for us! Every time we come to the Lord's Supper, we repeat those words: "This do in remembrance of Me." Every time we come to the Lord's Supper we remember what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

I have — and I meant to bring it, but it's in my office. I have a leather-bound King James Version Bible that was given to me in 1974 on my birthday from my bride-to-be. [She's not here, so she won't be embarrassed. She's in Scotland, in case you think she was mincing church!] We had just decided that we would get married, and she gave me this leather-bound King James Bible, and it's inscribed. And it's a remembrance of God's provision for me. She is the only girl I've ever dated and the only girl I've ever kissed, and God willing, that will remain so!

You know, one of the commentators on Ebenezer calls it "the gospel rock." I love that. The gospel rock, because when you look at this stone you are reminded of good news: that God delivers His people. And my dear friends, God has delivered you and me from worse than the Philistines. He has delivered you and me from the fires of hell.

But it's a twin-edged sword. I told you there was a sting in the tail. Why did Samuel call it Ebenezer? Because it was at Ebenezer that the Israelites were camped when the ark of the Lord was taken. When they look to this rock, yes, they remembered the mercy of God, but they also remember the absolute, sheer, unmitigated folly that had got them to this situation in the first place. It was a reminder of their sin as well as a reminder of grace. Just as the cross is a reminder of our sin, our wretched God-defying sin, and the beauty...the wondrous beauty of His grace and mercy to us in the gospel.

“Here I raise my Ebenezer.” What a great God we have. What a wonderful God we have. Let's pray together.

Let's pray.

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