

Spiritual Restoration Brings God's Restoration

1 Samuel 7:3-8:22

Faithfulness Under Pressure

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One of the invaluable benefits of being a Christian for a long period of time is possessing a spiritual memory.

That is to say, the longer one is a believer, the more examples from the past a believer can recall during which God tangibly demonstrated his love in a believer's life.

In the same way, a longtime Christian also can recall times when he or she *didn't* trust in the Lord and *didn't* follow his commands — and vividly remember the disasters that ultimately resulted.

You'd think that having such memories in mind would serve as a warning (and an encouragement) to believers to draw on personal history and move in the right direction “this time.”

But we're human, and sometimes our memories fail us — and we end up sinning in the same ways we did before.

This scenario plays out in this past week's study Pastor Don took us through, which covered 1 Samuel 7:3 all the way through 1 Samuel 8:22.

Previously we saw that the Ark of the Lord had been returned to Israel, and for 20 years the people of Israel “lamented after the Lord.” (7:2)

Samuel then told 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.” (v. 3)

Then something very important happened. The people of Israel followed Samuel's directive, and they “put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and they served the Lord only.” (v. 4)

Think for a moment about where the people of Israel have come from over the years all the way up to this point in history regarding their willingness to trust in the Lord and obey him. Think about how many times God had shown his love and care in tangible ways to the people of Israel — and how many times they either forgot or ignored their own history, and went their own way.

It's indeed amazing to consider that even when Almighty God presents himself and offers his unconditional love to the people of Israel that they reply with, “Nah. I'll take it from here.” To the point where, in 1 Samuel, they worship pagan idols while keeping

God on the back burner. Kind of half-hearted commitment — which, in effect, is no commitment at all.

But aren't you and I exactly the same? As Pastor Don asked us, what are OUR idols? What do we prioritize consistently over our relationships with Jesus? Is it the television, the computer, the smartphone, social media, work, money, relationships, comfort, food, activities, notoriety, "likes"? The world provides an abundance of the aforementioned — much of it nowadays right at our fingertips and just a click away — and they can be awfully hard to resist, to "put away."

As for the people of Israel, at this point in the passage, they are taking the right path. They've seen the error of their ways, their sin, and they want the Lord's help, and they put the eye-candy idols away and repent and follow the Lord only. Samuel takes them through this process of repentance in verses 5 and 6.

Then in verse 7, 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."

Really? They were afraid? Indeed, they were. As Pastor Don said, fear set in even after the people of Israel confessed and repented, they still didn't get it. Even after all their history of the Lord bringing them through crisis after crisis, rather than relying on the Lord to help them against the gathering Philistines, the people of Israel defaulted to fear.

Pastor Don told us that at this point the Israelites were expressing no confidence in God — but on the positive side, they were at least a tiny bit wiser. Having just been slaughtered by the Philistines after putting their trust in the Ark instead of God himself, this time amid their fear they asked Samuel to intercede to the Lord on their behalf.

"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.'" (v. 8)

Remember what happened next?

"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. And the men of Israel went out from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them, as far as below Beth-car." (vv. 9-11)

As Pastor Don said, the Israelites putting away their idols only half solved their problem. Getting rid of idol worship was a crucial, necessary start that demonstrated repentance outwardly — but they needed to repent inwardly, too, which is much more

important. Serving God “with all of our hearts” and serving ONLY him is the key to restoring our relationship with God to their original, intended beauty! And as we just saw, the victory the Lord provided here against the Philistines was exactly the kind of win the Israelites were expecting when they trusted in the Ark of the Lord instead in the Lord himself.

Then Samuel set up a stone, calling it Ebenezer, to remind the people of Israel of the Lord’s decisive victory on their behalf. As Pastor Don said, “It’s NOT us. It’s God.” We all need to maintain that kind of humility at all times!

Afterward the subdued Philistines “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.” (vv. 13-17)

What a turnaround for the people of Israel. All because they turned from their sinful ways and served God only.

Pastor Don noted that Samuel also showed that one person can make a huge difference in the lives of others — then he asked us what we’re doing as individuals to make a difference. Certainly we don’t have the platform of a Samuel, but we can still make a spiritual impact in the lives of those around us, whether that means with our families, our friends, our neighbors, our co-workers — and our co-worshippers right here at Graceway.

In our 1 Samuel passage, sadly we see that the good times for Samuel and the people of Israel would not last — and all due to their own sins and missteps. (Again, just like us today.)

In chapter 8, when Samuel was old, he made an error in judgment — showing that even after years of acquiring wisdom, sin is always a possibility — and appointed his sons, Joel and Abijah, as judges over Israel instead of letting God choose judges.

Then, just like clockwork, the consequences of that ungodly decision take place: “Yet his sons did not walk in his ways but turned aside after gain. They took bribes and perverted justice.” (v. 3)

And the bad decisions kept cascading.

“Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah and said to him, ‘Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us **like all the nations.**’” (vv. 4-5)

Don't miss that phrase. "Like all the nations." Like everybody else. A desire to "join the crowd." Elevating what is clearly ungodly because — like the attractive idols the people of Israel *just got done putting away* — it means immediate gratification and ease. But, as Pastor Don pointed out, it's not God's way.

And how does that work out for the people of Israel?

Samuel checked things out with the Lord in prayer, and the Lord replied, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them." (vv. 7-9)

Pastor Don noted to us what should be a comforting aspect to what the Lord told Samuel: They are not rejecting you; they are rejecting me. Much like if we share the gospel, and people don't listen, they are not rejecting us, they are rejecting the Lord's offer of salvation. We must take comfort in that.

So, Samuel warns the people of Israel against having a king appointed for them — and even describes what will happen if they get their way. It's all terrible stuff.

But, again, even after all that God has brought them through, the memory of the people of Israel fails. And they want what they want when they want it.

"No! But there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles." (vv. 19-20)

Again, they want to "be like all the nations" — and have a king fight their battles. Not God.

Big mistake.

All of us can recall times when we didn't trust in God and failure and disaster resulted. In big ways. In little ways. In all ways.

But today is a new day.

Let us make it a practice to harness our spiritual memories. If we've gone through a time when we obeyed God, let us meditate upon that and recall the good that came out of it. If we've gone through a time when we ignored God's commands, let us meditate upon that and recall the difficulties that resulted.

Whatever we do, let those memories remind us of the right way to go. Let us put them to work for us and never forget them.

And the bottom line is that our lives must reflect continual repentance.

This is where many Christians stumble. Our salvation is a once and for all experience.

The instant we believe in Jesus we have eternal life.

But repentance must be ongoing. Restoring our relationship with the Lord is never a “one and done deal.” If we sin, we recognize it, we ask for forgiveness and repent, and move forward. Wash, rinse, repeat. Always. Every day, every hour, every minute.

Continual humility.

Pastor Don wisely warned us that lacking such humility can be dangerous.

Overconfident Christians have pride in their lives — and we all know what pride leads to.

Samuel was Israel’s helper. But we have an infinitely greater helper: The Holy Spirit. If we need help today (who doesn’t?), the Holy Spirit is waiting for us to ask for his help and guidance — and to hear from our repentant hearts — so he can restore us.

What are we waiting for?