

THE DUTY AND BLESSING IN REPENTANCE

1 Samuel 7

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Our scripture today is found in 1 Samuel 7, beginning in verse 2 of this rather short chapter.

“It was a long time, twenty years in all, that the ark remained at Kiriath Jearim, and all the people of Israel mourned and sought after the LORD. And Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, ‘If you are returning to the LORD with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.’ So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only.

Then Samuel said, ‘Assemble all Israel at Mizpah and I will intercede with the LORD for you.’ When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, ‘We have sinned against the LORD.’ And Samuel was leader of Israel at Mizpah.

When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled at Mizpah, the rulers of the Philistines came up to attack them. And when the Israelites heard of it, they were afraid because of the Philistines. They said to Samuel, ‘Do not stop crying out to the LORD our God for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines.’ Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. He cried out to the LORD on Israel's behalf, and the LORD answered him.

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 a panic that they were routed before the Israelites. The men of Israel rushed out of

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Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth Car. Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, 'Thus far has the LORD helped us.' So the Philistines were subdued and did not invade Israelite territory again.

Throughout Samuel's lifetime, the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines. The towns from Ekron to Gath that the Philistines had captured from Israel were restored to her, and Israel delivered the neighboring territory from the power of the Philistines. And there was peace between Israel and the Amorites.

Samuel continued as judge over Israel all the days of his life. From year to year he went on a circuit from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah, judging Israel in all those places. But he always went back to Ramah, where his home was, and there he also judged Israel. And he built an altar there to the LORD" (1 Samuel 7:2–17, NIV).

My message today is titled "The Duty and Blessing in Repentance." Repentance is not necessarily a popular word today. It's a good Bible word, but it's often misunderstood. Some people mistakenly associate it with tremendous outbursts of emotion. It's true that sometimes in repentance a person can show strong emotion. But as we'll see today, the fundamental aspect of repentance is not necessarily emotional. It has to do with a changing of the mind more than simply a changing of the feelings. In fact, sometimes the person will repent, and the repentance will be an act that is contrary to how they feel. All their feelings tell them to keep doing what they're doing. Yet the Lord insists upon repentance.

Also, repentance sometimes is misunderstood because it's associated with a term called "penitence." Penitence means you've asked for forgiveness, but you have to do a number of things in order to secure the repentance. Penitence is not a biblical concept or word. Repentance,

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when it is expressed to the Lord, is complete. The Lord does not put you on a conditional probation. The freedom—the pardon—is there. So the Lord is not into us engaging in self-flagellation as a result of repentance. When we've repented, that's it.

Another common misunderstanding about repentance is that it is done by those who have an overly sensitive guilt complex. So if a person does not have a sensitive guilt complex, they may look with disdain at someone who does and say, "That's not for me." Repentance is for that person who has a conflict. In looking at repentance, we realize there's a difference between true guilt and false guilt. True guilt is when we have violated a clear biblical command or principle. False guilt is when we go around blaming ourselves for disastrous choices and mistakes we perceive we've made—even though those choices have not been in violation of a command of God. We just keep saying, "I should have done this or I should have done that." In today's era, a large part of society has abandoned absolutes in morality and doctrine. So, repentance isn't too popular.

In the Bible, repentance happens in two ways. Firstly, it happens as a life-transforming, once-and-for-all experience. It is associated with our coming to faith in God through Christ Jesus—where we repent of our sins, have Christ's forgiveness given to us, our names written in the book of life, and we are granted salvation. That's a once and for all tremendous turning point and change in our lives. Secondly, repentance for the Christian may be expressed in a series of inward corrections over a lifetime—bringing portions of our life that are not conforming to the will of God into conformity with His will. This repentance does not relate to your standing with God as it pertains to salvation. But it does have to do with areas of your life where you've gotten out of sync with God's will. Repentance—whether it's the once-and-for-all act or an adjustment in an area of our life—comes when we realize that we have missed a goal, a target that God has

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set for us. We have failed to be what He's called us to be. We have stepped over a line or transgressed some commandment that God tells us to keep.

As you hear this message on repentance today, don't hear it as a generic sermon on repentance. I would like you to personify and internalize it. Ask yourself some questions as we go along. First, "Is there any aspect of my relationship with the Lord in which I need repentance?" Then ask, "Is there any relationship I have with family where I need to express repentance?" That can be a tricky and tough one. Often, in close personal relationships, we are waiting for the other person to change before we change. Unfortunately, repentance doesn't work that way. Repentance doesn't look at the fault in another—it looks at the fault in oneself. Truth is a howling reproach. It's contained in the form of moral absolutes. The Bible and the Holy Spirit bring us illumination on what we need to repent of—what is a howling reproach to God. It may not even bother us. But if it is out of character with God, and we begin to realize it—then it will begin to bother us. Often when it comes to relationships, we say, "It's the other guy who has the problem." But is there a problem with us? Not only should we look at our relationship with the Lord, but we should also look at our relationship with our family. Is there an aspect of our relationships with other people in general that we need to look at? Conduct, attitudes, language, words—do any of them call for repentance in our lives?

In 1 Samuel, so far we have seen the background—the setting of the stage—for what occurs in chapter 7. In the first three chapters of 1 Samuel, the main word there is "Samuel." They were all about the birth and the emergence of Samuel as a youngster. Then in chapters 4-6, the key themes were "the ark of the covenant" and "backsliding." Israel lost the ark—it lost the glory of the Lord. It went into a long period of declension away from the Lord. Now we come to chapter 7, which begins in verse 2. It sums up this period of backsliding on Israel's part with this

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poignant phrase, “It was a long time.” Sometimes in backsliding, or being away from the Lord, we don’t start out intending for it to last as long as it does. Twenty years, for example, is a long time. For an adult, it’s half the span of a life.

I think I’m speaking by and large to Christians today. Is there an area in your life that is out of sync with God’s will? How long will you let it go? Twenty years, twenty-five years? Will you let this message be a catalyst the Holy Spirit uses in your life to do something about it? How long will you carry a grudge, for example, if you have one? How long will you delay implementing some Christian discipline that the Lord wants in your life? How long will you delay assuming responsibility for your actions and attitudes—or will you continue to blame someone else for what has happened to you? Twenty years? That’s a long time. What is the duty of repentance? And when the duty has been performed, what is the blessing of repentance? That’s what 1 Samuel 7 teaches us. There are four duties of repentance, and there are four blessings in repentance.

I. The first duty of repentance is to repent with all your heart.

In verse 3, Samuel says to the whole house of Israel, “If you are returning to the LORD with all your hearts.” Therefore, in repentance, we cannot have reservations, it cannot be partial, and we cannot place conditions. “If so and so does such and such, then I’ll do such and such.”

Repentance must be with your whole heart—no reservations, no partial repentance, no conditional repentance. It must be total and complete—with all your heart.

When we hear the word “heart,” we might mistakenly assume that Samuel is addressing feelings. As Americans, we feel with our heart, and we think with our mind. We need to take a moment to figure out what the people of that day did. They thought with their heart, not with their mind.

The heart was not the seat of emotions like it is with us. The heart was the seat of volitional

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decision making abilities. They regarded emotions as being in the bowels. We have the phrase in the Bible “bowels of compassion.” I doubt that any of us have used that phrase lately. It doesn’t sound good, so we quit using it altogether. We’ve located ideas in the mind and feelings in the heart. But in the biblical world, the heart made the decisions. That, of course, goes very well with the meaning of repentance—which simply means in the Greek language “to change one’s mind”—to have a transformed mind. And this is to be with all your heart—no mental reservations of any kind. All your heart. We must be ready for it.

II. The second duty of repentance is to rid ourselves.

God required the Israelites to rid themselves of the Baals and the Ashtoreths. Let’s see what that means in their culture, and then we’ll translate it to ours. The word “Baal” is a common word in the Old Testament. It was a common Canaanite word for a god or gods. When Israel came into the promised land under Joshua, they found that the word “Baal” was located in many different sites. “Baal” means “possessor, owner, husband.” Every piece of land had its local Baal—its local deity, its local husband, owner, possessor. So in the Bible, we have local places hyphenated. They had a surname—Baal and then the surname. In the New Testament it comes across “Beelzebul”—lord of the high place. As time went along in Israel’s history, Baal increasingly came to stand for the Canaanite male god of fertility. And his consort was Ashtoreth, who was the goddess of love, war, and fertility.

Archeologists have dug up plaques bearing the image of Ashtoreth. Whenever her image is found, it is found in a feminine form. Canaanites integrated sexual immorality with their religious worship. The idea was that they worship God vertically as they have sexual relationships with another human being. It was this temptation that drew in the Israelites. And they knew better. They knew that worship of God was not joined with any immoral practices.

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God specifically forbade immorality in personal life as well as in religious rites and acts of worship.

We might ask, “How did the Israelites—who had the covenants and the commandments and who knew the one, transcendent, true God—how did they get sucked up into such an adulterated expression of religious faith? How did they get drawn into it? How did they give themselves to Baal and Ashtoreth?” I think there’s an easy answer to that. I think it’s easy because the spirit of Baal and Ashtoreth never died on the earth. Baal and Ashtoreth are no longer worshipped together, but the principles they represented are still alive. If we ask, “Why did they worship Baals and Ashtoreth?” We should ask ourselves, “Why do Christians—who have a belief in an eternal, true God and believe in righteousness, justification, and holiness—let pornographic material and satellite programming which has “R” and “X” ratings into their home?” Is it because we are drawn in with the exact same sexual temptations that the Israelites were?

On the one hand, we would like to keep our faith with the Lord because we know that worship is true, it’s so affirming, and it’s so right. But on the other hand, we want to compartmentalize our lives. We want this aspect of our lives, mainly our sexuality, where we make the terms, not God. The names have changed, but the issues are the same. God’s people fall into weakness, decline, and backsliding when they try to merge the carnality of this world with relationship and faith in God through Jesus Christ. All of our public and private acts—even the events of our heart—are totally open to God. That’s not an altogether comforting thought. God has access to us, and He gives us, in His Word, a clear instruction—rid ourselves of those influences, attitudes, actions, and words that are unlike Him. And that comes through the act of repentance.

III. The third duty of repentance is to make an exclusive commitment to the Lord.

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Samuel tells the people, “Serve [the LORD] only.” Jesus said the same thing, “No man can have two masters. He will love the one and hate the other. You cannot serve both God and mammon” (see Matthew 6:24). Mammon means temporal things. We have to make an unreserved commitment in our hearts to serve the Lord and do His will.

IV. The fourth duty of repentance is to have a clear external act of repentance.

This was Samuel’s experience in 1 Samuel 7. Repentance must be more than something we intend to do. There’s a difference between intentions and carrying out your intentions. Intention must be expressed. That’s the way it is with all relationships in our society. Intent must be followed by some express action.

Israel intends to repent. It intends to bring all of its heart to God. That is then followed by the express actions of assembling at Mizpah, pouring water on the ground, fasting, and then verbally confessing, “We have sinned against the LORD” (verse 6). There is a very clear external act of repentance that takes place.

The same thing happens in the New Testament, when John the Baptist preaches repentance.

What do people do? They come forward and are baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. It’s the same thing under the apostles’ ministry. There was an external act associated with repentance.

What is of special fascination with the external act of repentance in 1 Samuel 7 is the pouring out of water. To my knowledge, that’s not done anywhere else in Scripture as a symbol of repentance. Yet, it is a fitting symbol. It represents the pouring out of the life or the heart to God. Lamentations 2:19 puts it this way, “Arise, cry out in the night, as the watches of the night begin; pour out your heart like water in the presence of the LORD.” In 2 Samuel 14:14, the wise woman says to David, “Like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered, so we must die.

But God does not take away life; instead, he devises ways so that a banished person may not

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remain estranged from him.” That could be my favorite verse. The pouring out of water is saying, “Lord, our hearts are dying. We’re surrendering our life to you.” Then 2 Samuel comes along and says that when you do that, God is right away handing you back life. You gave up life, but He’s giving you greater life. The verbal confession is clear, “We have sinned against the LORD.”

Those are the duties of repentance. Repent with all your heart. Rid yourselves, and make an exclusive commitment to the Lord. Then follow that intention by an express action. This pattern holds true. And when the duty of repentance is kept, the blessing of repentance is given. Here are the blessings in repentance that we see in this chapter.

V. The first blessing is a clean and clear heart with God.

I think it’s seen well in verse 8 where the people come to Samuel and say, “Do not stop crying out to the LORD our God for us.” That shows they were ready to talk again with the Lord. It is a tremendous contrast with their attitude twenty years before in 1 Samuel 4. Then, they got involved in a losing skirmish with the Philistines and they asked, “What went wrong?” And somebody said, “We forgot to bring a piece of furniture—the ark.” So they got the piece of furniture, and they still lost. On that occasion, nobody answered, “No one is talking to God for us anymore. And our hearts are not right.” They were looking for some magical totem pole to save them in 1 Samuel 4.

But now that attitude has changed. This time they don’t even ask for the ark. They’ve got it back in their possession, but they don’t ask for it as the Philistines come near. They’re depending on their relationship with God to save them. I submit to you that they would not have depended upon the Lord had they not had a clean and clear heart. When the sin is put away, we’re then able

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to have a clear and clean heart with God. We no longer divert our gaze from Him, but we have clear communication with Him. That's the blessing in repentance—a clear and a clean heart.

VI. The second blessing of repentance is that God acts on our behalf.

In 1 Samuel 7, God gives and continues to give Israel victory over the Philistines. The day of the first victory in 1 Samuel 7:10, Scripture says, “That day the LORD thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines.”

We know from the New Testament that God's people are not always victorious over external enemies. Sometimes we do not win over circumstances. Sometimes we are not prosperous. When we are impoverished, it does not always mean we are outside God's will. Conditions are different in the Old Testament because of the different application of God's covenant. The same principle is in the New Testament which is manifest in the Old Testament—God always acts on behalf of His people. He may act on behalf of an answered prayer, but that is somewhat conditional on our faith and His will. But when we ask Him to forgive our sins, He always acts on our behalf. When we ask Him to write our name in the Lamb's book of life, He always acts on our behalf. When we lay down our body in death trusting in Him for the resurrection, He will always act on that. He is committed to His word and to His promises.

The Lord thundered in 1 Samuel 7:10. This may help us understand what God is saying to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus. For in His death, the earth shook and the rocks split. And at His resurrection, there was a violent earthquake. Through shaking the natural elements, God was saying, “I will keep My word to you.” God is committed to forgive us when we have repented, and He will act on our behalf. God will keep His word. God's going to keep His word which He made at Calvary. He will keep His word, “If you will confess your sins, I will be faithful and just

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to forgive you your sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness” (see 1 John 1:9). God will act on our behalf.

VII. Another blessing of repentance is we’ll have a testimony in our own life.

Jesus brings a testimony to our life. There’s a transformation that takes place in our life, but there’s further room for growth. That’s a testimony. The testimony in this story revolves around this word “Ebenezer.” Samuel erects a monument of stone and calls it “Ebenezer,” meaning “stone of help.” In the context of 1 Samuel, it was the place where Israel was first defeated when it started backsliding. Twenty years later, when they win their first victory after repenting, the place has no name. But Samuel takes a stone and says, “I’m going to call this stone ‘Ebenezer.’ The place where we lost has now become the stone of help. Previously, it was a stone that weighed us down. Ebenezer was a heavy stone. But because God has won a victory for us, it has become a place of help.”

I think this applies to all of the situations in life where we’ve been brought through loss—whether we’ve been on drugs or had an abortion or have been a person who has abused someone or have been abused ourselves or have been immoral. Who better can help others with the same problem than those who have repented and been freed of their sins by the Lord? Who can best help the drug addict, for example? The person who has seen the transforming power of the Lord in their own life and has been set free from drugs. Who can best help a person who is struggling with homosexuality? It is the person who had a homosexual orientation but found the delivering power of Jesus Christ was stronger than their sexual urges. That person is able to turn around and, through their testimony, share powerfully how God took a place of defeat and loss in their life and brought victory. You now have a testimony. Christians are more than people who believe a set of principles. They are people who know the delivering power of God who has set

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them free. We were enslaved, but Jesus brought us into liberty as sons and daughters of the living God. There is testimony as a result. It's the whole idea of an Ebenezer. There's a blessing in repentance—when we repent, God gives us a testimony.

VIII. The fourth blessing of repentance is stability and well being.

Israel did not have that in its twenty years of backsliding. But with its repentance comes a most cherished word in the Hebrew language, *shalom*. Even today, Israelites use this word to greet and part with each other. Shalom means “peace.” Peace for the Israelite means far more than the English word “peace.” For us, it means two people have quit fighting or two parties have quit warring. But shalom means that you're able to fulfill all your potential. You have a state of well-being that is rich and deep. Stability—shalom.

With that shalom came the long-term ministry of Samuel. He served as a circuit judge all the days of his life. When God's people are at peace, there can also be stability in leadership. There cannot be stability where there is a continual relationship of tension and fighting. You have to lay those things aside in order to have stability. The only way you can lay them aside is through ongoing repentance.

In the course of this peace, Israel extended its border, which is a way of saying from the New Testament vantage point, “When the body of Christ has thoroughly repented of known sins and has made its relationship right with God, then people who are living outside of relationship with God are brought into the good news of God's peace—evangelism.” The stability and well-being is emphasized by the reference that Samuel built an altar to the Lord at his home in Ramah. This suggests that in a time of repentance, we have a regular place of meeting with God and have communion with Him. We're willing, by the expression of that altar, to again and again put

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ourselves on it and say, “Here I am God. Without reservations, I offer myself completely to serve You and to do Your will.”

Closing Prayer

Lord, we come now to You in this moment of prayer. We gather together the questions that we were asked in the beginning today. Questions which ask us if there were areas of our life for which we have need of repentance—areas of relationship with You, relationship with family, and relationship with others in general. Perhaps we have fallen into the subtle trap of blaming someone else for our misery. When in actual reality, Your Holy Spirit deals with us today and says to us, “How long are you going to live with those horrible attitudes? How long are you going to live speaking those terrible words? How long will you live captive by those negative thoughts?” You come to us, and You assure us that You can redeem us in a moment after nineteen, twenty, or even thirty years of excuses. In repentance, we say, “It’s not the preacher. It’s not my wife. It’s not my husband. It’s not my brother. But it’s me, Oh Lord, standing in the need of prayer.” Grant to us, Lord, that honest heart to come to You with all of our heart. To come before You determined to rid ourselves, by Your help, of those things which bind us and quench our potential as a man or woman of God. Grant us, Lord, the blessings in repentance when we come. We know, Lord Jesus, that You will. Let this time of communion today be a time of introspection, a time of confession, a time of healing, a time of repentance, and a time of restoration in our lives. May we meet with You, Living God, and wherever You need to change the course of our heart, we ask the Holy Spirit to have access in us today—to bring that change. Through Christ Jesus our Lord, we pray in His name. Amen.