



## 1 Samuel 7:3-15

I know that some of you have been for a visit to the Holy Land, but I also know there are many that haven't and possibly can't afford to do so. May I suggest an alternative which I as a Welshman would recommend: that you take a trip to Wales instead. In a few short miles, you too and visit places with all those familiar Bible names!

### VALLEY CHURCHES

Someone once said that travelling in the valleys of South Wales was like a trip to the holy land. It was quite common to name churches after Bible places: Zoar, Moriah, Zion, Pisgah, Bethel, Carmel. I was brought up in a Bethesda – it was much rarer for the Brethren to name churches after Biblical places. MY Dad was brought up in an Ebenezer. I guess many of you may think of Scrooge whenever you hear the name Ebenezer.

But Ebenezer is an important name in scripture. We read that after this great victory, Samuel erected a standing stone which was named Ebenezer – the Stone of Help because they said “up to now, the Lord has helped us”.

As we leave one year – a significant year in the life of this church – and enter another, we can look back as Israel did and say “up to now, the Lord has helped us”. To mark our bicentenary we haven't erected a standing stone; we've got something more significant to us – a set of comfy chairs! But we can still raise our Ebenezer – up to now the Lord has helped us. TITLE

And what a year it has been. We've frequently remembered event sin the bicentenary and give God thanks for a great year and a series of successful things as a church. We've seen new people come, and a few old friends leave. We've seen the consolidation of the ministries of the church. It's been the first full year of my Pastorate – well, there had to be something bad, didn't there!!

Now we need to look forward. What do we expect year 201 and beyond to look like? Here's a warning for us. WOOLWORTHS We are all saddened to hear that Woolworths has closed down, particularly for the 26000 who have lost their jobs. Woolworths is like an old friend – who we treasured – but of course rarely visited. No-one expected not to see an old and respected name to disappear off the high street. OLD FRIEND It was due to celebrate its centenary this year. Being around a long time in this world does not guarantee you'll make next year. The same is true of churches. We've been here 200 years but for it to survive 201 and beyond, we need to recognise we are God's people and this is His church. MRBC So what can we learn from God's word?

TITLE Let's look at this morning's passage. Israel had sinned and gone away from the Lord. They had started to worship foreign gods, their leaders had become corrupt. As a result God let them be defeated by the Philistines and the Ark of the Covenant had been captured. But the Philistines had a bad time with it – no surprise and ended up sending it back to Israel.

You would have thought that after the defeat and then the return of the Ark, that people would have sought to have got themselves right with God. They did – eventually - after 20 years. 20 years when the nation just stayed as it was. It didn't go forward. It didn't go back. It was continually raided by the Philistines. And people just took it.

Then they realised that if things were to change as a nation and they were to prosper something had to be done. And they approached Samuel, the Prophet and Judge that God had raised up to rule them. What shall we do?

What can we learn from this episode, thousands of years down the line?

### REPENTANCE

## ◆ Repentance

*3 Then Samuel said to all the people of Israel, "If you are really serious about wanting to return to the Lord, get rid of your foreign gods and your images of Ashtoreth. Determine to obey only the Lord; then he will rescue you from the Philistines." 4 So the Israelites got rid of their images of Baal and Ashtoreth and worshiped only the Lord.*

*5 Then Samuel told them, "Gather all of Israel to Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you." 6 So they gathered at Mizpah and, in a great ceremony, drew water from a well and poured it out before the Lord. They also went without food all day and confessed that they had sinned against the Lord. (It was at Mizpah that Samuel became Israel's judge.)*

The answer Samuel gave them is probably identical to answers given to the people of God each time they have realised that to go forward spiritually and as a people, they need to return to God. Over Christmas I focussed many of my words towards people who had once walked in the faith but for whatever reason have moved away from God whether they just drifted away in their faith or turned their back on God. The message was simple – God rolls out the red carpet and welcomes all those who wish to return to Him.

But the same message also goes to each one of us which is especially poignant at the beginning of a new year - do we want to move closer to God? Then He waits with open arms to do that. If we desire to see the work of God prosper here in Walton and Felixstowe and through the work of this church fellowship then the message now is the same as the message then. Repent – turn around and start walking God's way, following Him. The instruction to repent was two-fold.

### FOREIGN GODS

Firstly it is to get rid of the foreign god. A foreign god is anything we replace God with in our lives. The people never rejected God in those days, they just hedged their bets and did what was convenient to them by trusting in things which are not God. What sort of things aren't God which we rely on – ourselves, money, people we are close to, our careers. Or do other things control us – compulsions of various kinds – drugs, alcohol, tobacco, pornography, gambling – all things that can take us over. Or maybe we try to live our lives by plain old-fashioned idolatry – astrology, consulting mediums, fortune telling and the like.

God doesn't play second fiddle to anyone or anything. We've just come through another Christmas and we thought again on the massive cost that God paid to redeem us. And we sing each Sunday of how He's worthy of all our praise. Yes He is. But He's worthy of all our lives as well.

I know I've given you this illustration before but I think it helps us understand what's going on here. When we come to Christ we open the door of our lives and welcome God in – to come in and take residence. The Holy Spirit comes in and we say my house is Your house. You can go where you like – as long as you stay in the hallway. And we go about our lives whilst the Holy Spirit waits patiently in the hallway. Later on we hear a stirring message and we pop back into the hallway and say "OK, I surrender some" and let him come in the living room. He's in our lives but we restrict where He can go because it suits us not to include God in parts of our lives we're a bit embarrassed about or don't want to give up.

God desires to be in all of our lives – the Holy Spirit wants to fill all of us. It took Israel 20 years before they bit the bullet and got the reply from Samuel that they expected: sweep out the foreign gods.

What are our foreign gods this morning? How much of our house does the Holy Spirit occupy? What's holding us back from offering the rest? Whether it's our own personal lives or the church – what haven't we surrendered. What do we need to surrender?

I've mentioned before that repentance is about turning. Turning from my way to God's way. Repentance is not a one-off for most Christians, but a process; a process that can take time – about as much time as we're prepared to resist the Holy Spirit's overtures to us to fill our lives. But we've got to let Him do that. The people resisted repentance for 20 years. Their lives were blighted for 20 years in the meantime. God doesn't desire we blight our lives, but that we open them to Him.

## CONFESSION

The second thing that they were called to was to come before God and confess their sinfulness. Never confuse repentance with confession. Repentance is so much more than confession of sin – it produces the desire to change. But confession is an important part of the repentance process. It is genuinely telling God we are sorry. And when we are genuinely sorry we find forgiveness and the Holy Spirit is able to sweep out that sin from our lives and occupy that space. As we start the year we come around the Lord's table and we have an opportunity to say sorry. Not a child-like sorry, but something out of a genuine heart for wanting God to change us as we surrender to Him.

## RESISTANCE

### ◆ Resistance

*7 When the Philistine rulers heard that Israel had gathered at Mizpah, they mobilized their army and advanced. The Israelites were badly frightened when they learned that the Philistines were approaching. 8 "Don't stop pleading with the Lord our God to save us from the Philistines!" they begged Samuel. 9 So Samuel took a young lamb and offered it to the Lord as a whole burnt offering. He pleaded with the Lord to help Israel, and the Lord answered him.*

So you're all fired up for seeing God do great things in 2009? Good. Satan is going to oppose you all the way. Many of us had a great year last year. But you and I know there have been people in the fellowship that have had a difficult time in the past year. We often think that if we are keen Christians that our keen-ness somehow protects us. It doesn't. If you want to stand for Christ then trouble invariably follows. If it isn't you, it's your family and your friends that Satan attacks. Satan wants to wipe out your witness as a Christian. Some times he succeeds. But God doesn't want us to fall and fail. He has provided us with the means to deal with all the pressures and disasters of life.

Knowing that we will suffer attack to a greater or lesser extent what do we do? **GOD WILL CHANGE THINGS** The first thing is to recognise that God can change the situation. **PRAYER** The second is the pray – not just leave it to ourselves either, but ask others we trust to pray for us. Samuel was a spiritual as well as a political leader. He prayed for them whilst they had to face the Philistines. Prayer that recognises a God who can change situations works, as we shall see from our last point.

## RELIANCE

### ◆ Reliance

*10 Just as Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines arrived to attack Israel. But the Lord spoke with a mighty voice of thunder from heaven that day, and the Philistines were thrown into such confusion that the Israelites defeated them. 11 The men of Israel chased them from Mizpah to a place below Beth-car, slaughtering them all along the way.*

*12 Samuel then took a large stone and placed it between the towns of Mizpah and Jeshanah. He named it Ebenezer (which means "the stone of help"), for he said, "Up to this point the Lord has helped us!"*

*13 So the Philistines were subdued and didn't invade Israel again for some time. And throughout Samuel's lifetime, the Lord's powerful hand was raised against the Philistines. 14 The Israelite villages near Ekron and Gath that the Philistines had captured were restored to Israel, along with the rest of the territory that the Philistines had taken. And there was peace between Israel and the Amorites in those days.*

Prayer works when it is borne out of a trust that we have a God who can and does change situations. And Samuel prayed and they worshipped as the Philistines bore down on them. And they learned a lesson that day that we need to learn as well. God changes things. But He does not. Who would have thought that God would so miraculously intervene in the way He did that day? But He did. What expectation do we have of God as we pray?

What people want to know in this generation is "can God make a difference in my life"? We say "yes He can", but do we believe it? Because we need to. For most people in our community, amongst our prodigals and even amongst our fellowship, the issue is not how convincing our faith is intellectually, or how satisfying worship is; but whether following Jesus makes a difference. We say,

yes it does! But how much difference is He actually making? How much of Jesus do people see in us and in our church fellowship? Because it's that which is going to make the difference.

We know that, but we need to make sure the fact moves from our heads to our hearts?

For Israel, the memory of that day was accompanied by an *aide memoire* - a standing stone called Ebenezer – the Stone of Help. It was there to remind them that God had been their help and He would be their help therefore in the future so they should not be afraid to approach Him.

Set up an Ebenezer today. As a church, you're sitting on the *aide-mémoire* of the bicentenary. These seats are here to remind us of God's goodness – but also to remind us that He can do this again and again and greater than this, if we are prepared to trust.

But to be as trivial as chairs would be a bad way of describing a Stone of Help. God has given us a greater stone. He's called the Cornerstone. He's not just a memorial, He's the foundation of each believer's life and of His church.

*Eph 2:20 Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself.*

As we come around the table and into a new year let's commit ourselves afresh to Jesus, our chief cornerstone.

*Heb 13:5-6 "...he has said, I will never leave you, nor forsake you. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do to me."*

Let's come before Him for forgiveness

Let's turn to Him and ask us for strength to remove any foreign gods from our lives

Let's affirm again the victory that Jesus achieved on the cross

Let's ask the Holy Spirit to give us victory in those areas of our lives satan has tried to destroy

Let's pray for fresh encouragement to resist the devil knowing that if we do so, he will flee from us

Let's affirm again our reliance on the one who is the foundation stone – Jesus – our Ebenezer

because as we look at Him we say "up to know, the Lord has helped us"

*Preached by Mark Reid  
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