

From Ichabod to Ebenezer

1 Samuel 7:2-17

The last time we saw the Israelites encounter the Philistines in battle was in chapter 4, and it was a complete disaster. Under the leadership of the high priest Eli and his two wicked sons, Hophni and Phinehas, Israel took the ark of the covenant with them into battle, thinking that they could manipulate God's power against their enemies. Instead, they were soundly defeated. The ark, the symbol of God's covenant presence, was taken captive, and the men of the priestly family all died on the same day. The wife of Phinehas went into sudden labor from the report of the shocking news, and then she died in childbirth, but not before she named her son "Ichabod," which means "The glory has departed." The last encounter with the Philistines, in other words, led to Ichabod, a land and people forsaken by the presence of God. However, this battle in chapter 7 leads to a very different outcome. Instead of Ichabod, we have Ebenezer, or the "stone of help" that memorializes God's deliverance of Israel from the Philistines roughly twenty years later. A people once forsaken by God's glory-presence now celebrate and remember him as their helper and deliverer.

What is the major factor that explains the difference between chapter 4 and chapter 7 of 1 Samuel? It is the presence of Samuel himself. We saw the story of Samuel's birth in chapter 1 in response to his mother Hannah's prayers. We saw snapshots of his childhood in chapter 2, followed by his special calling by God and establishment as a prophet in chapter 3. But from chapters 4-6, the account of the ark's journey to Philistia and back, Samuel has not been mentioned. He has been absent from the story. But now with Eli's family having fallen from leadership, the stage is set for Samuel to fill the gap and bring Israel into a period of renewal. There is a pathway from Ichabod to Ebenezer, and it runs through the godly leadership and influence of Samuel.

As Christian readers of the Old Testament, our gaze must not stop there. It would be one thing to say, "Well, isn't that interesting. I now have a better grasp Samuel's story arc." but that wouldn't bring this text to bear on our own lives. We who believe that all Scripture points us to Jesus Christ must press further and see in the rise of Samuel over Israel a type, or an anticipation, of the greater ministry and blessings of Jesus Christ. Apart from Christ, you could write "Ichabod" over our lives. In Adam, we are exiled from the Garden, captive to the powers of this age, and under the threat of God's coming condemnation. The glory has departed from us, for "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). But in Christ, you could write "Ebenezer" over our lives, for God is for us, and "if God is for us, who can be against us" (Rom 8:31)?

This story may address some who are right now captive to sin and in need of the deliverance that only Christ can provide. I urge you not to harden your hearts, but to welcome the exposure of your own sin. As Luther once put it, Jesus didn't die for imaginary sins. He died for real sins, the ones you don't like to think about, talk about, or acknowledge are present in your life. And for others who are walking with the Lord, I hope this story will aid you in obeying Paul's command in Colossians 3:1-3: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on the things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." Let us set our minds on things above, on Christ himself, by reflecting on Samuel's rise and Israel's

renewal as a type of the greater salvation we have in Christ. The pathway from Ichabod to Ebenezer is real, and it runs through Jesus Christ.

Taking Samuel as a type of Christ, I want to walk through the three main sections of this story, highlighting in each one a different element of Samuel's leadership that prefigures a different facet of the glory of Jesus Christ for us. First, notice

I. Samuel's prophetic ministry and Israel's repentance (vv. 2-6).

Chapters 4-6 relate to us the adventures of the ark of the covenant, which had been taken by the Philistines in battle, but subsequently returned to Israel after God humiliated the Philistine god Dagon and then inflicted the Philistine people with tumors. The ark ended up in the Israelite city of Kiriath-jearim at the house of a man named Abinadab. With the high priest Eli and his sons now dead, there was no more tabernacle to speak of at this time, and the ark was no longer at the center of the religious life of the people. The people of Israel had been humiliated in battle, their leadership had been wiped out, and their religious life (as corrupt as it was) had been upended. As a result, it seems they settled into a life of ignoring God for twenty years, hardening their hearts and continuing to pursue the worship of false gods. The way I read verse 2, it was after twenty years that a new stirring of conviction arose among them, and they "lamented after the LORD." Repentance begins with conviction of sin, and the stirrings of conviction began to be felt after a long period of spiritual darkness.

And this was just the moment for which God had prepared Samuel. In response to these stirrings of conviction, we read in verse 3, "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 Ashteroth 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.'" Samuel is ready to declare the word of God to the people, urging them not to stop at conviction, but to press on to true repentance, which means whole-hearted devotion to God. It can be difficult for modern people to understand the appeal of false gods in the ancient world. Why did Israel worship them so much? One reason is that fertility worship (such as the worship of the fertility god Baal) included sexual practices that no doubt had their own appeal, just as perverse sexual practices have for many today. Idolatry and sexual perversion go hand-in-hand, and they always have. Another reason is that it was widely believed in the ancient world that the gods were the keys to peace and prosperity. Worshiping them brought benefits, and neglecting to worship them could bring down their wrath. And so the call to put away foreign gods was a call to Israel to do something that was completely at odds with the accepted assumptions and practices of their day. Samuel was raised up as a prophet of the Lord at a time when the people were ripe to hear the difficult call to repentance that they needed to hear.

And according to verse 4, the people listened to Samuel's call, put away the Baals and the Ashteroth (gods and goddesses), and worshiped the Lord alone. So Samuel called for a great assembly at Mizpah to formalize their national repentance. At this gathering, the people performed a water-pouring ceremony, perhaps as way of showing that their devotion to the Lord mattered more than life-giving water itself. They fasted from food to show that they did not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Deut 8:3). And they confessed their sins, humbling themselves in poverty of spirit. And then the end of verse 6 tells us, "And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah." What that means is that Samuel became

their recognized national leader, like those leaders in the book of Judges. He applied the Word of God to their hearts and lives and led them to organize their national life around the worship of the true God. Their repentance was real, thorough, and complete.

The first recorded words of Jesus in his public ministry in the New Testament are, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 4:17). He was not one more prophet in a line of prophets. He was, and is, the capital “P” Prophet of God, who not only heralded the nearness of the kingdom of God, but ushered it in by his coming. And in bringing in the kingdom of God, he heralded a call to repentance from sin and whole-hearted devotion to himself that is necessary to enter the kingdom. Belonging to God’s kingdom begins with recognizing our sin for what it is and turning from it as we give ourselves wholeheartedly to Christ.

Several years ago, New Testament scholar Don Carson published a memoir of his father Tom, who had been a pastor and church planter in French-speaking Canada. Included throughout this book are quoted sections of Tom Carson’s journal. Don included one entry from 1961 that his father Tom wrote about an incident involving Don and his sister Joyce. Apparently, young Don had done something wrong but was unwilling to own up to it. Tom wrote, “Joyce’s record was broken, but why did not Don take the blame? I feel discouraged, for both these children are so dear to me, both want to go on with God, but the unwillingness to credit the possibility of being at fault – this baffles me.”¹ Notice Tom Carson’s wisdom here in his recognition that if his children continue down the path of being unwilling to acknowledge that they are at fault for anything, there is no way they will grow in the knowledge of the Lord. Why? Because, as Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:3). Poverty of spirit is a recognition of your own spiritual bankruptcy, leading to casting yourself in dependence on the grace of God. That cannot happen if we cannot acknowledge our sin and turn from it.

Refusing to look squarely at our sin, making excuses, and blaming others are all tactics of an insecure heart that desperately desires to justify itself. Without the ability to justify ourselves, we feel exposed before others, and thus open to their condemnation. But everything changes when we see the call to repentance in light of the promises God has given us in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God holds out to you the promise of justification, that your value and identity in his sight will be securely determined by his covenant headship, his obedience, his righteousness, and not your own. Freed by those promises to let go of the paltry fig leaves by which you try to cover your shame, you are able to expose yourself completely, openly, and honestly. You are able to acknowledge your sin for what it is and turn from it, because the security of your identity no longer rests in making yourself look better than you are. The call to repentance that comes to us from Christ also brings with it the promise of complete acceptance with God, because of Jesus Christ.

Samuel is a prophet who turns Israel back to whole-hearted devotion to the Lord, prefiguring Christ who calls us to repentance so that we may enter the kingdom he brings. Second, notice **II. Samuel’s priestly ministry and Israel’s deliverance (vv. 7-12).**

The Philistines, Israel’s pagan overlords, heard about this mass gathering at Mizpah, and they may have assumed that Israel had gathered there to organize an attack. Seeing a potential threat, the lords of Philistines gathered their military forces and caught Israel by surprise. The Israelites didn’t come prepared to do battle. They came as worshipers, not soldiers, and their lack of

readiness to fight left them in a state of fear. So how did they respond? Last time they found themselves facing long odds against the Philistines they sent to Shiloh to retrieve the ark and carry it into battle, thinking they could domesticate God for their own purpose. But this time, notice their response in verse 8: “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.’” Although there would have been nothing wrong with the people crying out to the Lord themselves, the story shows that they recognized something important about Samuel, namely, that he stood as a mediator between them and God. His prayers for them, therefore, carried weight.

And so Samuel took a nursing lamb, offered it as a burnt offering, and then cried out in prayer to the Lord. Stripped of any hope of reliance on themselves, Israel, through Samuel their priest, threw themselves entirely on the mercy of God. And God answered them in an unmistakable way. With the smoke of the burnt offering still rising, mixed with the sound of Samuel’s cry, and with the sound of Philistine footsteps approaching, storm clouds suddenly collected overhead, and God thundered from heaven against the Philistines with a sudden storm that left them terrified and confused, so much so that the makeshift army of Israel was able to chase them off the battlefield. Earlier Hannah had prayed, “The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven” (1 Sam 2:10), and her prayer has been fulfilled. This outcome, brought on by Israel’s humble cry expressed through their priest Samuel, is the polar opposite of the outcome we saw in chapter 4, when they proudly assumed they could domesticate God’s power and direct it by their own will. Their repentance has been brought to a moment of testing, and it has been proven genuine.

In response to their victory, Samuel set up a memorial stone, naming it Ebenezer, or “stone of help,” saying, “God has been there for us every step of the way.” Verse 12 is one of numerous passages in Scripture that points us to the necessity of remembering. By actively remembering what God has done in the past, we bring the past into the present and strengthen our faith to face what is in front of us today.

Israel was delivered by the intercession of their mediator, Samuel. In Hebrews 7, one of the arguments the author makes for why Jesus is a better high priest than the priests of the old covenant is because, having been raised from the dead, Jesus lives forever. In Hebrews 7:23-24, he writes, “The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever.” Death will never end the high priesthood of Jesus Christ. He will forever be our Mediator before God. So note then the conclusion the author of Hebrews draws in verse 25: “Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” The moment Christ stops interceding for you is the moment you perish under the wrath of God. But as long as he lives to stand before God on your behalf, you will have God’s favor upon you. It has been said that if you could hear Jesus praying for you in the next room, you would never fear anything again. Well, if you listen to what Scripture says, you do in fact hear him praying for you. If Samuel’s mediation could effect a temporal, earthly deliverance for Israel, Christ’s mediation effects for us an eternal, heavenly one. So don’t you ever dare place your hope anywhere else. Jesus Christ is the one Mediator between God and men.

As we continue following the story, we come to its last section:

III. Samuel's ruling ministry and Israel's peaceful order (vv. 13-17).

These verses summarize the period following this battle, the period during which Samuel led Israel as a judge. Verses 13-14 speak of the external order and peace that the people of Israel enjoyed. The Philistines, who had been their oppressors for decades, did not attack them anymore. In fact, the Philistines even restored to Israel the cities they had previously taken over. This is because, as the end of verse 13 reads, "the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel." Samuel was not a military leader, but the Lord fought on his behalf and subdued the Philistines before him. And verse 14 even notes that the Amorites (the remaining non-Israelite inhabitants of the promised land) lived at peace with Israel during Samuel's days. This peace was likely the result of their fear of Israel's God, stemming from the reports of this battle in which the Philistines were routed. Samuel presided over a nation at peace externally.

Samuel also brought internal order to Israel. Notice the summary in verses 15-17: "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." As judge, Samuel applied the Word of God to the civil order of the nation. He established justice in the land and led the people to walk in the fear of God. And, as the end of verse 17 reads, he also led the nation in worship: "And he built there [at Ramah] an altar to the LORD." Keep in mind that we are at an unusual time in Israel's religious life. The ark is sitting at Abinadab's house in Kiriath-jearim. The priestly family has been decimated, and thus there is no more centralized worship to speak of as there had been before at Shiloh at the tabernacle. Because of this reality, during the time of Samuel you will notice references to "the high places." In the books of 1-2 Kings, the high places are presented negatively, because they draw worship away from the temple and are thus not authorized worship sites. But in this unusual situation, there is no centralized site of worship, and Samuel therefore makes Ramah a site of worship. Thus, he organizes the national life of Israel as best he can (given the circumstances) to the ordinances of the Law of Moses. Israel's external peace and order is matched by internal order, driven by the worship of their God.

Samuel is not a king, but he acts with a ruling authority to bring order to Israel at a chaotic time for the nation. By leading the people in repentance and interceding on their behalf, Samuel's leadership results in the experience of covenant blessings upon the nation during the time of his rule. Under the terms of the Mosaic Covenant, obedience results in blessing and disobedience in curse. Samuel's generation, having turned to the Lord with their whole hearts, experienced the blessings of that obedience in the form of peaceful order in their society during the days of Samuel.

In Christ, we too are in covenant with God, but not in a covenant that depends on our obedience to secure blessings. Instead, we depend on Christ's obedience, and the blessing he has secured for us in the age to come. And that age to come has already broken into this present age in the resurrection of Christ and in his enthronement over the cosmos. He now reigns at the right hand of God, restoring humanity to our rightful place that had been forfeited by Adam. But the powers and principalities that Christ has toppled are not going to take this lying down, so during this present age they rise up against the church. We have enemies on every side. If you look at all the

major institutions that shape the direction of our culture today, you are looking at institutions that are wholly given over to the primary contender against Christianity in the West: the sexual revolution. Think of the most elite universities, the media companies, the tech companies, the major corporations, and the entire entertainment industry. Can you think of a single institution with widespread influence that is standing up for truth against the lies of the sexual revolution? No, you can't. There is a unified front in this war to marginalize the voice of historic Christian faith and replace it with the voice of a new paganism that is committed to the destruction of the family, the murder of the unborn, to unrestrained sexual license, and to the undoing of nature itself in the deconstruction of male and female. Rainbow flags and pride parades are becoming the new civil religion of American life in many places, and I don't see any signs that this movement will slow down anytime soon.

In this emerging world, you who stand in obedience to Christ regarding human nature, marriage, sexuality, and the sanctity of life are viewed as standing against the inevitable march of progress and justice. And do you know what happened to people who stood against "progress" in totalitarian states before? They were scapegoated, marginalized, and in some cases, they were eliminated. Are you prepared to face that if we reach that same point? You will be if you have a settled conviction that Christ reigns as king, that all opposition to him in the end will be crushed, and that you stand to inherit the kingdom with him. The order that Samuel brought to Israel is only a foretaste of the new covenant blessing of the kingdom that is to come when the reign of our King is revealed. There is not a single thing our enemies can do to take that from us.

There is a pathway from Ichabod to Ebenezer, and it runs through Jesus Christ. He is not merely a prophet like Samuel who calls us to repentance. He is *the* Prophet, the final revelation of God, who summons us to enter the kingdom by acknowledging our sin, turning from it, and embracing him by faith. He is not merely a priestly figure like Samuel who effects an earthly deliverance by sacrifice and intercession. He is a priest forever, risen from the dead, ever living to make intercession for us, and thus able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him. He is not merely a ruling figure like Samuel who brings order to an earthly society. He is the King of Kings, exalted at the right hand of God, reigning over the cosmos, and whose kingdom shall have no end. He is our prophet, priest, and king.

I extend now an invitation to the Lord's Table, which is our Ebenezer, an institution of remembrance of what God has done for our salvation. If you have not embraced Christ by faith and identified yourself publicly as his disciple through baptism, please abstain today. But do not wait another day or another moment to turn to Christ in faith now. If "Ichabod" is still written over your life, if you are exiled from the presence of God, trust his promise to welcome you to himself through his Son, who was given for you. "Well, I've done some terrible things." Israel had tried to manipulate God by using the ark of the covenant as a magic charm. That level of blasphemy is hard to match. "Well, I have felt distant from God for too long." Israel spent twenty years in spiritual darkness, sinking farther into neglect of God, and yet that wasn't too long a time to leave them without hope. "Well, my situation is too difficult, and I'm just too discouraged." Israel lived under the oppression of a pagan people for decades. You don't have more cause for paralyzing discouragement than they did. "Well, Samuel is not here today to lead me." No, he's not. But Jesus is, and Jesus is all you need. You have no excuses. Whatever your

situation today, the path from Iahabod to Ebenezer is laid out before you, the path of repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ.

If you are a believer in good standing with a church, we welcome you to partake with us today as we remember Christ's sacrifice, commune with him and one another, and proclaim his death until he comes. Amen.

1 D.A. Carson, *Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor: The Life and Reflections of Tom Carson* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 86.