

1 Samuel 7

The ancient Roman historian Livy, once described his age as an age in which

“we can neither endure our vices nor face the remedies needed to cure them”

In many ways that describes our culture. A vast range of sensitive people recognise that underneath our confident glittering culture, there lie deep problems. From the breakdown of the family, to terrorist plots, to economic down-turns, we live with constant reminders that all is not entirely well.

Interestingly many of the most popular prophets of our age recognise a religious dimension to this unease. Last week I mentioned Ian McEwan. His books are absolutely fascinating. I mentioned the book “Saturday” in which Matthew Arnold’s poem Dover Beach, lamenting our culture’s loss of Christian faith, takes centre stage. A violent young man, for a moment is stopped in his tracks by the deep sadness of the poem – but then he continues on his rampage of violence.

McEwan’s book *Atonement* – which was turned into a film of the same name – has a deeply interesting theme. The central character commits a terrible injustice against a young couple, and seeks to atone for her sin, in a very imaginative way. But the message of the book is as simple as it is stark. She cannot atone.

It is not just the undertone of sadness in McEwan’s books which fascinates me. It is the fact that his sadness seems to be focused on our collective loss of Christian faith.

Or take another writer – Nick Hornby. In his book *How to be Good* the main character is seeking a life in which she can be at ease with herself, living with a good conscience. Religion is toyed with in a hilarious way, but she finally resolutely settles on a conventional middle class married life. But the book ends with a shocking last sentence.

But just at the wrong moment I catch a glimpse of the night sky... and I can see that there is nothing out there at all

It shocks. It tantalises. As if her whole quest for a good life is done in the context of “nothing.”

As Livy said we cannot endure our vices as a nation. Alongside the trumpeted victories of our new post-Christian world, there is a real sense of loss articulated by

leaders and opinion formers. But most people are also unwilling to face the remedies of our vices. We look to government – either to spend more, or to create a big society. We look to science. We look to counsellors, or alternative religions, or a hundred other things. But very few open their bible.

Many many people are in a kind of spiritual no man's land. It struck me this week that there is a similarity between our situation as a nation, and the state of the nation of Israel at the end of 1 Samuel 6.

Let me just remind you of the story in 1 Samuel so far. In these chapters we have seen that God is doing two things. He is raising up the humble – he blesses humble Hannah, and her servant-hearted son Samuel. But he is also putting down the proud. Those proud irreligious priests, obsessed with money sex and power – Hophni and Phineas are cut down in battle and the ark of God, the symbol of God's presence, is captured by the Philistines. God has no time for pride amongst his people. He will put it down.

But he is equally ruthless with the proud Philistines. They think that their god Dagon has won against the God of Israel – but he gets toppled and broken, and they are terrorised by a plague.

Finally the Philistines send back the ark on a cart.



1 Sam 6:14

You would think all was now well. Israel has learned her lesson, the Philistines have been thoroughly trounced by God himself, and God is back where he should be. But all is not well



1 Sam 6:19a

Here we go again. The Israelites are not humbly reverent towards God, and God is still dangerously hostile to acts of impudent pride. How will Israel react?



1 Sam 6:19b-21

She reacts essentially in the same way as the Philistines had done. They kept passing the ark of God from city to city, because of the plague which followed it, and now Israel is doing the same.

To be fair to them there is an element of reverence to it in their case.



1 Sam 7:1

Eleazar the priest guards the ark, and no doubt oversees worship. But they are still really saying “Get God out of here. Let’s organise worship at a safe distance. We cannot have him in our midst.”

1 Sam 7:2 says that that continued for 20 years.

Can you perhaps see the connections with today? Last week we witnessed the Philistines walking away once they had returned the ark to Israel. Plenty of people are in that situation today – they have walked away from the God of Jesus Christ. But there are others who are not ready to walk away entirely but they are not yet ready to worship the God of Jesus Christ, as he calls us to.

In Samuel 7:2 says that for those 20 years

The people of Israel mourned and sought after the Lord.

But the NIV may be being more generous to them than the original. They literally “mourned together after the Lord”. They felt a sense of loss – like Ian McEwan, like Nick Hornby, like millions of others. Were they actively seeking him? Yes and no. They were mourning, but in the next verse we will see that they continued to keep their other gods close to them.

They felt the loss. They were not yet ready for the remedy.

Now let me say that this may apply to two groups here. There will be those who actively profess Christian faith. But you sense that there has been some slippage. Like Israel you have put God over there in a safe place – but you sense the loss. That can go on for decades. Indeed there is a common problem in our culture of young people, especially young men, being on fire for God, but over the years the collective pressures and seductions of our world, take their toll, and leave them deeply compromised and high and dry spiritually. There is an epidemic of spiritually immature middle aged men in our nation.

And it also applies to those here who may not yet be professing Christian faith. You are here because you are dissatisfied with the gods of materialism, or sex, or fame, or whatever. But you are not yet ready to let God come closer than that hill over there.

For both of you – it doesn't need to stay like that. It could – for decades. But it doesn't need to.

1 Samuel 7:3 is a turning point. Three things are introduced at this point in the story which turn Israel around – from mourning and moping, to joyful triumph. Three things they needed. Let me show them to you.

The first is a messenger.

☞ *A messenger*



1 Sam 7:3a

Samuel has been missing for all the events of 1 Samuel 4-6. Who knows where he was, what he was doing. But now he is here – a man with a message.

His message is simple and uncompromising.



1 Sam 7:3

Three things they are to do:

1. Rid themselves of foreign gods and Ashtaroths. Or as it describes them in verse 4 – Baals and Ashtaroths. Baals were the male gods – gods of power, literally “Lords”. Ashtaroths were female gods of fertility. Its money sex and power again.

Get rid of your idolatrous attachment to wealth, to relationships, to status, to prestige, to worldly success. Stop thinking that the god of the stock exchange, or the god of Hollywood, or the god of university degrees, or the god of botox, or the god of “a house of my own” or the god in the mirror will satisfy you.

Only the God of all creation, the God of Jesus Christ, will provide you with your deepest needs, and all other needs as well.

Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well

2. “commit yourselves to the Lord” – or the ESV “direct your hearts to the Lord”. The word has a sense of laying foundations for a building. Perhaps the best translation is “establish your hearts on the Lord”.

What makes your heart beat a little faster? That is what will end up being your god. So ask God to make your heart beat faster for him! And when something else attracts

your attention and thrills you, turn it into praise to him. He gave that good thing. Whether it be a beautiful sight, a wonderful home, a supportive family, a great job or whatever. He gave it. If you worship the thing itself it will turn to ashes – as Russell Brand so memorably told us last week. But if you worship the God who gave it, then you will be able to enjoy both the thing and God.

“Establish your hearts on the Lord”

3. And the Samuel says “serve him only”. This follows naturally from the first two. Once we have banished those false gods, and set God himself as the foundation for our hearts, then the discipline to serve him only will come relatively easily.

Put service first and the false gods will lure you, and your wayward heart will distract you, and service will die. Put away false gods, establish your hearts on the Lord, serve him only.

On some ways I and people like me, are today’s messengers. But in other ways we have a greater messenger than that today. Jesus is God’s supreme messenger. He is described as “the Word” – through him God speaks. In the book of Revelation he is pictured as a great warrior with a sword coming out of his mouth – his tongue is a mighty weapon.

You want a messenger who will help you to respond in the way Samuel describes? Read the gospels. Read the words of the Son of God.

They needed a messenger. They needed an intercessor too.

☞ *An intercessor*



1 Sam 7:5

Someone to pray for them. Christians here are you praying for others? You see a Christian brother or sister slipping away from their formerly vibrant faith – are you praying? You see someone who is not yet a Christian mourning their sense of loss – are you praying?

You who feel the need to get sorted with God. Do you know that it needs a miraculous work of God that only prayer can produce? Are you seeking the prayers of others?

Once again there is a greater intercessor than any of us. The New Testament says that Jesus is “at the right hand of God interceding for us” (Romans 8:34). He knows what it is like to live down here. He knows what it is like to be human. And he whispers on our behalf into the ear of God.

That is what he is doing for you right now. You are hearing these words. I hope and pray that people in this room are praying for you – we are praying for one another. Because nothing I say is of any value unless God does something in our hearts. (Perhaps someone will also pray for those who listen to the MP3 of this sermon!). But more than any of that Jesus is sitting there in the heavenly throne room, and he is saying to God “please father have mercy on him, be kind to her, give them repentance, and faith and new life, and incredible joy, and everlasting salvation, and a purpose and so much more.”

But there is a third thing that makes the intercession profoundly powerful. It is a sacrifice.

A sacrifice

The Israelites are still fearful.



1 Samuel 7:7

Satan also sees into your head, and he sees something going on there. “Quick – we must attack” he says. Let’s muster all the forces we have – lets defeat them before they begin. Lets fill his or her head with all they will lose. Let’s threaten them with fearful pictures of what they might become if they follow Christ. Attack!



1 Samuel 7:8-9

He not only prayed he offered a sacrifice. None of us is called to offer a sacrifice like that. Because the great messenger, the great intercessor, was also our great sacrifice. Jesus died on the cross, to pay for all our transgressions and to bring us to God. He fully and finally removed any last barrier between us and God, just as Samuel did in a provisional and partial way with that lamb.

And that sacrifice finally opens the flood gates of heaven.



1 Samuel 7:10

“Don’t stay with God at a distance.” – Fay Weldon