

Summer Sermon Series: Sing to the LORD

“Prone to Wander”

(1 Samuel 7)

Introduction

- For this year’s Summer Sermon Series – “Sing to the LORD” – we are utilizing biblical themes/lyrics from great worship songs as the basis for our sermons. So far, we have preached on the greatness of God – Psalm 139 (“How Great Thou Art”; 1885); the substitutionary atonement of Christ – 2 Corinthians 5:21 (“Rock of Ages”; 1776); the sovereignty of God – Psalm 46 (“A Mighty Fortress is our God”; c. 1529); Jesus as our Advocate – 1 John 2:1 (“Before the Throne of God Above”; c. 1865); and the character and activity of the devil – various Scriptures (“Our Great God”; 2002).
- The worship song for this morning brings us to the seventh chapter of the book of 1 Samuel. As their names indicate, the biblical books of 1 and 2 Samuel – which were originally one book – recount God’s dealings with the Israelites during the time of Samuel’s life. Samuel was dedicated to the Lord by his mother, Hannah, who had been barren and vowed to give her child to the Lord if He enabled her to get pregnant (1Sam.1:11). God granted her request, and Hannah made good on her vow. After Samuel was weaned, Hannah gave him over to the priest Eli to serve with him in the temple (1Sam.1:24-28).

Samuel is one of the heroes of the Christian faith, one of Israel’s greatest leaders (Ps.99:6; Heb.11:32). He is known as the last judge of Israel (1Sam.7:15), one of the earliest prophets of the Lord (1Sam.3:20; after Moses, Deut.34:10; Acts 3:22-24; 13:20), and he functioned as a (high) priest for Israel. He served during a dark and difficult time in Israel’s history, as the priesthood was corrupt, the judges were immoral, the ark of the covenant was captured, and the Israelites were idolatrous. Through it all, Samuel was a godly and faithful spiritual leader. And God used him to inaugurate Israel’s monarchy by anointing Saul as king (1Sam.10), which eventually led to the messianic kingship of David (1Sam.16 - 2Sam.24), and ultimately to the reign of Jesus Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords (Acts13:22-23; Rev.17:14; 19:16).

✓ Illust: “The events of 1 and 2 Samuel took place between the years c. 1105 B.C., the birth of Samuel (1Sam.1:1-28), to c. 971 B.C., the last words of David (2Sam.23:1-7). Thus, the books span about 135 years of history. During those years, Israel was transformed from a loosely knit group of tribes under “judges” to a united nation under the reign of a centralized monarchy. They look primarily at Samuel (c. 1105-1030 B.C.), Saul who reigned c. 1052-1011 B.C., and David who was king of the united monarchy c. 1011-971 B.C.” (The *ESV MacArthur Study Bible*; “Introduction to 1 and 2 Samuel).

- Before we turn to chapter seven of 1 Samuel, we need to understand what has previously transpired. In chapter four, Israel is defeated by the Philistines – losing 4,000 soldiers (4:1-2). In response to this defeat, rather than repent before the Lord, the Israelites superstitiously believed that they could be victorious over the Philistines if the ark was present with them. They saw “*the ark of the covenant of the LORD*” (1Sam.4:3) as a good luck charm, like a “lucky” rabbit’s foot, a four-leaf clover, or a symbol of a cross (or reciting the Lord’s prayer). They foolishly believed they could wield the presence and power of God by weaponizing that which symbolically represented the presence and power of God (see Ex. 25:10-22; 37:1-9).

But God cannot be manipulated, and He will not ignore sin. When the Israelites brought the ark to the battlefield they were again defeated, losing “*thirty thousand foot soldiers*” (1Sam.4:10), and the Philistines captured the ark of God (1Sam.4:11). In addition, Eli’s sons died (1Sam.4:11) and – upon hearing of the defeat, the death of his sons, and the capturing of the ark – Eli himself died (1Sam.4:17-18). The epitaph at the end of chapter four reads, “*The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured*” (1Sam.4:22). This is arguable one the worst days in Israel’s history – they were repeatedly and soundly defeated by the Philistines, their priest died, the ark of God was captured by their enemies, and it appeared as though the favorable presence of the Lord had departed from them.

✓Illust: “The glory of God had indeed departed, but not because the ark of God had been captured; the ark had been captured because the glory [of God] had already departed” (H.L. Ellison; quoted in *1Samuel: Looking on the Heart* by Dale Ralph Davis; p.57).

➤ In chapter five the ark brought disease and destruction to the Philistines, the enemies of God. First to their false god, Dagon (vs.1-5):

1 Sam 5:1-5 ~ “When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. ²Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon. ³And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. ⁴But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. ⁵This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.”

➤ Then, “*the hand of the LORD*” (1Sam.5:6, 9; “*the hand of God*”, vs.11) was heavily against the Philistines, as He “*terrified and afflicted them with tumors*” (vs.6) and even death (vs.12) – the people of Ashdod (vs.6-7), the people of Gath (vs.8-9), the people of Ekron (vs.10-11). After playing “hot-potato” with the ark of the *Lord* – foolishly thinking they could avoid God’s wrath – the Philistines sent the ark back to the Israelites (1Sam.6:1-12). When the ark returned the people “*rejoiced to see it*” (6:13). However, the LORD struck down many Israelites who “*looked upon the ark of the LORD*” (6:19; Note: textual differences have “[*the Lord*] *struck seventy men*” as possibly being “50,070 men”).

With great fear, “*the men of Beth-shemesh*” (6:20) asked “*the inhabitants of Kiriath-jearim*” (6:21) to take the ark from them, which they did (7:1). The ark of the LORD stayed at Kiriath-jearim for twenty-years (7:2), under the charge of Eleazar (7:1), as the Israelites “*lamented after the LORD*” (7:2).

➤ This clearly shows that Israel was defeated, and the ark was captured, not because God was powerless but because Israel was faithless! The Israelites, though they were God’s people, were not exempt from God’s judgment. Like the Philistines, they suffered consequences for their sins and needed to repent before the holy God. Israel had sinned against God (immorality, idolatry, disobedience), and were under the heavy hand of God’s judgment. They desperately needed God’s grace and mercy!

Ironically, tragically, while they mistakenly thought they could selfishly use the ark of God to wield the power of God, they seemingly forgot a major part of what the ark represented. Also called “*the ark of the covenant of the LORD/GOD*” (1Sam.4:3, 4^{2x}, 5), the very lid of the ark – known as “*the mercy seat*” (Ex.25:17ff; Lev.16:2ff; Heb.9:5) – symbolized God’s covenant with Israel. In the book of Leviticus (ch.16) we read that the high priest, only once a year (on the Day of Atonement), would enter into the Holy of Holies of the temple, where they ark was kept, to sprinkle the blood of an animal sacrifice onto the mercy seat to symbolized the forgiveness of their sin (see Rom.3:24-25; 1Pet.1:19; 1Jn.1:7; 2:1-2; 4:10).

➤ While the words “grace” (*charis*) and “mercy” (*eleos*) are often used interchangeably, there is a significant and helpful distinction that can be made between the two (Eph.2:4-5; Heb.4:16; Tit.3:5, 7):

Grace = getting what we do not deserve

Mercy = not getting what we do deserve

➤ Israel needed to seek God’s forgiveness – they had wandered away from their faith; they had forsaken God as their first love; they were disobedient and rebellious; they needed to repent of their sins and plea for the mercy and grace of God.

Luke 18:13 ~ “But the tax collector, standing far off [from the temple], would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’”

➤ Thankfully, in 1 Samuel 7, we read that Israel eventually sought the forgiveness of God. This chapter can be outlined in three sections, each detailing a different aspect of God’s mercy.

1. The plea for God's mercy (vs.1-6)

➤ After “*some twenty years*” (vs.2) of suffering under God's discipline and judgment, Israel was finally repentant.

1 Samuel 7:1 ~ “From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD.”

1 Sam 6:19 ~ “... the people mourned because the Lord had struck the people with a great blow.”

➤ Twenty years is a long, long, time! What took them so long? While asking God for forgiveness sounds easy – confessing and repenting from sin – it can actually be, spiritually speaking, quite difficult. After we succumb to temptation, we can spend a long time reeling in guilt, shame, bitterness, anger, and/or self-pity – feeling defeated and even condemned. How many days, months, or years have we wasted – suffering under God's just chastisement and corrective discipline – holding onto our sin and refusing to repent? How much time have we spent reveling in worldliness, or how long have we wallowed in guilt and shame? Satan loves to tempt you with sin, and he desires to keep you from repenting from sin.

How long does it take you to repent and turn away from sin?

✓ **Illust:** “Sin will take you farther than you ever intended to stray; sin will keep you there longer than you ever intended to stay; sin will cost you more than you ever intended to pay.”

➤ God's Word exhorts us to quickly and sincerely repent of our sins (Matt.3:2; 4:17; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 2Cor.6:2). By simple definition, “*repent / repentance*” (*metanoēō / metanoia*) is “turning from sin and turning to God.” It is the heartfelt desire to change our unrighteous desires and actions, and to pursue righteous desires and actions.

True repentance is much more than merely feeling sorrow for sin: “*For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death*” (2Cor.7:10). True repentance is not merely an attempt to avoid consequences of sin, but the humble commitment to forsake sinful desires, thoughts and/or actions. It is not mere lip-service to God. It is to sincerely grieve the act of sin, as well as the desire for sin.

Genuine repentance is not merely emotive, it is tangible. It is to be blood-earnest in seeking reconciliation to God, knowing that we are absolutely undeserving of God's mercy and grace.

➤ This is exactly what Israel sought to do.

1 Samuel 7:3-4 ~ “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.’ ⁴So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashteroth, and they served the LORD only.”

Ex 20:3-5 ~ “You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God ...”

➤ The Israelites genuinely repented of their sin – 1) they renounced their idolatry [“*put away the foreign gods*” (vs.3); “*the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashteroth*” (vs.4)], and 2) they rededicated themselves to God [“*direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only*” (vs.3); “*they served the LORD only*” (vs.4)]. And Samuel interceded for them in prayer, asking God to forgive them, pleading to God for mercy.

However, this was no easy task. This was not simply putting away idolized statues and figurines. They false gods, Canaanite deities, represented a (sinful) way of life. To put it simply, they represented fertility (“*Baal*”, vs.4) and sexual immorality (“*Ashteroth*”, vs.4). Consequently, their repentance was to renounce every superstitious and worldly attempt at prosperity, and to replace sexual immorality with sexual purity.

1 Kings 18:21 ~ “And Elijah came near to all the people and said, ‘How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.’ And the people did not answer him a word.”

Josh 24:14-15 ~ “Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. ¹⁵And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

➤ The earnestness of their repentance was evident in their confession and contrition.

1 Samuel 7:5-6 ~ “Then Samuel said, ‘Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you.’ ⁶So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the LORD and fasted on that day and said there, ‘We have sinned against the LORD.’ And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah.

2. The outpouring of God’s mercy (vs.7-11)

➤ The physical threat of the Philistines was still ominous. The Philistines were a mighty army, and the Israelite army was depleted and in disarray. Upon hearing that the Israelites were gathered together, making them a prime target, the Philistines once sought to attack – maybe this time they could finish them once-and-for-all.

1 Samuel 7:7-8 ~ “Now when 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. ⁸And 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.’”

➤ From a human perspective, the Israelites were right to fear the Philistines. For the Philistines had won successive battles against the Israelites (4:1-3; 4:10-11), killing about 34,000 Israelite soldiers between the two (4:2, 10). To make matters (much) worse, the Israelites had turned away from the Lord and suffered mightily under His just discipline (6:19).

The Israelites cried out to Samuel to intercede before the LORD for them (vs.8), and Samuel responded by sacrificing a lamb as an offering to the LORD (vs.9). This was an atoning sacrifice, symbolizing their need to be forgiven by God and reconciled to God (see Ex.22:30; Lev.1:4; 22:27). And the Lord responded with mercy and grace:

1 Samuel 7:9 ~ “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.”

➤ While the sacrifice was still in progress, the Philistine army “*drew near to attack Israel*” (vs.10). But Israel – now contrite and repentant – was reconciled back to God. God mercifully forgave their sin, and powerful intervened on their behalf:

1 Samuel 7:10 ~ “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.”

➤ The battle was over before it began. The fact that “*the LORD thundered with a mighty sound*” (vs.10) recalls the prophetic words of Hannah’s (Samuel’s mother’s) prayer: “*The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed*” (1Sam.2:7). This “thundering” represents the voice of God (see 2Sam.22:14; Job.40:9; Ps.18:13; 29:3-9; Jn.12:29).

Similar to what happened to the Egyptian army (Ex.14:23-29; see also Ex.23:27; Josh.10:10), God spoke and the Philistine army was thrown into confusion and were defeated without any help from the Israelites – “*and they were defeated before Israel*” (vs.10) – Israel was left with “mop up” duty to finish off the remaining Philistines (vs.11).

3. The remembrance of God’s mercy (vs.12-17)

➤To commemorate God’s victory over the Philistines, and His gracious mercy to the Israelites, Moses set up a memorial stone:

1 Samuel 7:12 ~ “Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer; for he said, ‘Till now the LORD has helped us.’”

➤In Hebrew, the word “*Ebenezer*” (vs.12; different location than 4:1; 5:1) literally means “stone of help.” Samuel wanted the Israelites – current and subsequent generations – to never forget what the Lord had done for them: God forgave them when they sinned; He helped them when they were helpless; He rescued them when they were in grave danger; He remained faithful to His covenant when they were unfaithful to Him. Every time the Israelites would pass this memorial stone, they would remember God’s merciful power and powerful mercy.

We too are prone to forget who God is, and what He has done for us. We can all too easily forget the gracious blessings we have received from God, and all too easily grumble against God [e.g., deliverance from Egypt (Ex.12:33ff) feared and grumbled at the Egyptian army (Ex.14); crossing the Red Sea (Ex.14) and then grumbled about having no water (Ex.15:23-24)]. We can wander away from the Lord, worshipping idols and disobeying God’s commands. We can take the Lord for granted, presuming on His grace and love, wrongly thinking that He should serve us rather than we should serve Him! We can be dulled or deceived into thinking too little of sin or too little of the Savior!

We are prone to wander away from the Lord, and away from His commands. Therefore, we need to be constantly reminded of His character and attributes, His Word and commands, His will and pleasure – who He is and who we are! This reminder is one reason why we need to faithfully study the Bible, and faithfully attend church. Otherwise, like the Israelites, we can drift away from God and into idolatry and worldliness.

1 Cor 10:6-14 ~ “Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. ⁷Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.’ ⁸We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, ¹⁰nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. ¹¹Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. ¹²Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. ¹³No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. ¹⁴Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.”

1 Sam 8:4-9 ~ “Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah ⁵and 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.’ ⁶But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, ‘Give us a king to judge us.’ And Samuel prayed to the Lord. ⁷And the Lord said to Samuel, ‘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. ⁸According 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. ⁹Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.’”

➤ We need to remember the stone of Ebenezer – “*Till now the LORD has helped us*” (vs.12). The phrase “*till now*” (vs.12) does not convey doubt but the reassurance that as God has always helped and He always will. God will never fail, forget, or forsake His people. God will never breach or disavow His covenant.

We need to be reminded of God’s past mercies and power, so that we can be assured of His present and future faithfulness. We need to be reminded that we deserve nothing good from God, but that every good thing we receive from God is due to His mercy. We need to be reminded that we are desperately lost – helpless and hopeless – without the LORD!

✓ Illust: “Samuel, then, with his Ebenezer monument seeks to rivet Israel’s memory to the past and most current of Yahweh’s mercies. He knows that it is memory that keeps gratitude fresh, and that gratitude keeps faith faithful” (Dale Ralph David; *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart*; p.77).

1 Samuel 7:13-17 ~ “So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel. And the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. ¹⁴The 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. ¹⁵Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. ¹⁶And he went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah. And he judged Israel in all these places. ¹⁷Then 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.”

Conclusion

➤ Robert Robinson was born in England on September 27, 1735, to Christian parents. In 1743, when Robert was just eight years old his father died. This tragedy sent him reeling into years of anger, bitterness, and rebellion. Eventually, his mother, unable to control him, sent him to London to apprentice as a barber at the age of fourteen. There, he got involved with a gang, which led him into a life of drinking, gambling, and prodigal living. Several years later, he convinced some of his fellow gang members to attend an evangelistic meeting held by (the famed evangelist) George Whitefield. Biographers differ in their accounts of Robert’s reasoning for attending, some stating he went there to mock those in attendance while others claim he went there searching for answers.

By God’s providence, Whitefield preached on Matthew 3:7, which reads: “But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’” During the sermon, Whitefield burst into tears and exclaimed, “Oh, my hearers! The wrath to come! The wrath to come!

Robert was immediately convicted, feeling as though Whitefield was preaching directly to him. Recalling that night he said, “those words sunk into my heart like lead in the water. I wept... and for weeks, I could think of little else.” On December 10, 1755, Robert, now age 20, declared that he “found full and free forgiveness through the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

Robert quickly entered into ministry and, at the age of 22, wrote the now famous hymn, “Come Thou Fount”, which is based on 1 Samuel 7.

Verse 1

Come, Thou Fount of every blessing / Tune my heart to sing Thy grace
Streams of mercy never ceasing / Call for songs of loudest praise
Teach me some melodious sonnet / Sung by flaming tongues above
Praise the mount! I’m fixed upon it / Mount of Thy redeeming love

Verse 2

Here I raise mine Ebenezer / Hither by Thy help I’m come
And I hope by Thy good pleasure / Safely to arrive at home
Jesus sought me when a stranger / Wandering from the fold of God
He, to rescue me from danger / Bought me with His precious blood

Verse 3

Oh to grace how great a debtor / Daily I'm constrained to be
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter / Bind my wandering heart to Thee
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it / Prone to leave the God I love
Here's my heart, O take and seal it / Seal it for Thy courts above

Verse 4

O that day when freed from sinning / I shall see Thy lovely face
Clothed then in blood-washed linen / How I'll sing Thy sovereign grace
Come, my Lord, no longer tarry / Take my ransomed soul away
Send thine angels now to carry / Me to realms of endless day

Words by Robert Robinson (1758). Music by Asahel Nettleton (1825). Public domain.

- This song is a Samuel-like call for us to remember the sovereign mercy and power of the LORD – that Jesus sought us, found us, and rescued us with His precious blood (Rom.5:8; 1Pet.1:19), and that we are prone to wander away from God and the love of God. We need the memorial “*Ebenezer*” stone before us at all times, praying that God would bind our wandering hearts to him and that He would seal our hearts in Him for all eternity.