

# *Getting the Color Right*

*1 Samuel 7: 3-12*

**First Presbyterian Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**June 30, AD 2019  
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

---

As our story opens today, the people of God have been spiritually adrift for years. Two decades earlier, they lost a battle to their enemy the pagan Philistines. More war was coming and they needed the LORD's help. But we do not read that they cried out to him. Rather, they thought they could secure God's power by taking the sacred Ark of the Covenant out of the temple and bringing it into battle. The Ark contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments. The Ark symbolized the presence of the God of Israel. They mistakenly thought that the Ark itself had power. If they used the Ark, God had to help. They got the story wrong. So the army surged forward with the Ark, and Israel lost even worse than before, some 30,000 men died. And the Ark was captured.

Israel was crushed not only in battle but in spirit. God didn't work for them according to plan. They had it all wrong about where God's power is. God would not be manipulated by means of his people wielding an object. Now the Ark actually got returned to Israel just seven months after capture. The Ark proved toxic to the Philistines: wherever they kept it, people got riddled with tumors. The God who could not be manipulated by his people would also not be mocked by his enemies. So the Philistines gave it back. But that did not restore Israel. They couldn't get over what had happened. Something in their relationship to the LORD had been interrupted. We read that "a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented the LORD" (I Sam. 7: 2).

We surely get that. Circumstances can shatter your ideas about who God is. A naïve faith gets disappointed. God doesn't "work" like he was supposed to, and you just don't know what to do. You have the form of faith but your heart's not in it. You are drifting spiritually. Picking up whatever is in the air around you. You start coping the way any old pagan copes. You start believing stories that do not follow the story of God's redemption of his people. The alternate stories seem more appealing. Back then, the Israelites picked up statues of the local gods, and started worshipping them alongside the LORD. For us, that looks like pursuing whatever is trending in our culture's quest of happiness. It could be a new gadget or a new relationship, a new drug of choice or a new cause that promises to save the world. You live chasing the dream. You get filled with delusions and

superstitions about what makes for life. And you just feel sad. Where is the joy of my earlier faith? Where is my hope? Where is a real sense of purpose? And all the while you are internally confused, numb or weak, the Philistines outside just keep circling and threatening.

Finally, Samuel the prophet called for the people to reconnect to their God. He preached for revival. When the people were good and tired of pursuing the false gods around them, he called everyone together. He laid it out. Simple, direct, honest, demanding, true: “If you are returning to the LORD I Am with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods among you and direct your heart to the LORD I Am, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines” (I Sam. 7: 3).

The response of Israel to this sermon astounds me. It’s the way the world ought to be, like an episode from *Leave it to Beaver*. In that greatest sitcom of the 60’s the father of the family, Ward Cleaver, would often give his sons advice. And he’d even tell them exactly what to do. In *Leave it to Beaver* world, the boys would always have an immediate reply: “OK, Dad! Sure, Dad! Thanks for the advice.” And then they’d do what Dad said and it would all work out. My parenting never quite went that way. But Israel did not hesitate to respond to Samuel. We read, “So the people of Israel put away the [idols] and they served the LORD only.” They just did it. They repented. They responded.

Samuel took that willingness and pressed them further. He took them through three dramatic acts of worship wrapped in prayers. First, they gathered again in one place. Samuel drew out a vessel full of water and poured it out on the ground. By his prayers, Samuel meant that this water was poured out before the LORD as a sign of confession and repentance and a plea for mercy. Samuel spoke on their behalf, “We have sinned against the LORD.” By their presence and their fasting, the people agreed with this prayer.

Now why pour out water as a sign of confession and sorrow for sin? Water in a desert region was precious. Pouring out water meant saying, “Great LORD I Am, you are our life. You are more necessary than water. We would rather die of thirst than be apart from you. We pour out our prayers for mercy: just as we pour out this water. Hear us! Water cleanses: cleanse us. Water gives life: give us life. We are nothing without you and we return to you now.”

Today we pour out water at baptism. We baptize in water, claiming the cleansing power of Christ. We go under the water to drown to sin and rise,

miraculously, to new life. We leave baptism dripping with the water of life, the living water that now flows from within by God's Spirit. We have made Christ Jesus first in our hearts. Memorial Day weekend, we stood as a congregation and reaffirmed our membership vows: we actually renewed our baptism by pledging our faith again.

Such spiritual consecration draws a spiritual reaction. There's a backlash. The Philistines heard that all Israel was gathered together, so they mustered their army for a decisive attack, to kill them all in place. The newly consecrated people of God were terrified. They begged Samuel to keep praying for them. "Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us, that he may save us" (I Sam. 7: 8). A dedicated people pleaded for the God who forgave their sins now to deliver them from enemies.

So the second dramatic worship act of Samuel was to offer a lamb as a sacrifice. A whole burnt offering in those days represented the offering of one's whole life. LORD God I Am, we are in your hands. You alone can save. We offer you this life as a sign of our lives. Without you, we will be obliterated. But if you receive us into your care, you can save us.

A lamb without blemish. Years later, John the Baptist would cry out, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn. 1: 29). Worthy is the lamb who was slain and who yet lives, to receive blessing and honor and glory and power. Into the hands of the Lamb of God we entrust our lives. When the Philistines press us, and we are in the clinch, there is only one place to go. Father, into your hands we commend our lives, trusting only in the blood of the lamb to save us.

So the LORD received the sacrificial offering. He thundered from heaven and the Philistine army was totally confused. Israel rose up and routed them. After such a heaven-sent victory, Samuel enacted a third dramatic act of worship. He raised up a standing stone. He called it Ebenezer, which means "stone of help." And he put the stone where all could see and be reminded, "Thus far the LORD has helped us" (I Samuel 7:12, NIV). He marked the moment. He created a way for the people to remember in the present what the LORD had done in the past so that they could hereafter trust what God would do for them in the future.

Again, no accident that we raise up bread at the table of remembrance. We lift up a cup. We declare the Triune God's saving acts at this table. We recall the past as we eat and drink in the present moment. We join ourselves right now to all

that God has done. And we trust in all that such a faithful God will do in the future. So throughout the centuries, Christ's people have declared a phrase right after the bread and cup are lifted and right before we eat and drink. We declare the mystery of faith. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.. Communion is our Ebenezer: thus far has the LORD brought us, and we are committed to him.

So the heart of this passage for us concerns how we respond to Samuel's path for reconnection to God. "Put away the foreign god and idols from among you and direct your hearts to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you from the Philistines." Not many of us have little statues of gods that we think will help us. But we are quite good at having idols anyway. An idol, of course, is any good thing that we make into an ultimate thing. It's any way we pursue life without God. Or any way we pursue getting God to do what we want on our own terms. An idol is a God substitute, something that promises life and peace and health without the demands of the God of the Bible. Idols always promise some good. They always under-deliver and eventually enslave. And here's a key point about idols: they come wrapped in a different story than the story of God's redeeming work in Scripture. They come with an alternate story about the purpose of human life, its main problems and what to do to overcome the problem and have a good life. They challenge the understanding that we are beloved creations of God, who are also sinful and in need of a savior. We exist to glorify God and enjoy him forever, but cannot get there without humbly asking for the grace of Christ. I thought we'd close by thinking of our idols in terms of colors. And that Samuel's call is a call for us to get the color right in our lives.

**Green.** Green is the color of God's good earth, the glorious gift of his creation in which we might dwell. Green is also the color of US currency, the most potent currency in history that opens doors to us of wonderful opportunity. But the good in green corrupts if we make of it an ultimate. Green money as an end in itself is one of the most obvious idols we keep falling for. It comes with the alternate story that money is an end in itself. It represents power and potential and freedom and prestige. The green dollar is the means to what you want. Of course, if it's your primary god, you will never have enough. You will never be satisfied. The hustle for the green will drive you down.

The green earth deserves our care; we were put here to have loving dominion in the world. There is a glory in the oxygenating, shade-giving, beauty of green. Saving the earth is a worthwhile goal. Unless it becomes an end in itself. For the green earth can also come with an alternate story. The earth can be seen as our goddess. We live from her and return to her, there is nothing more than this

green Gaia earth. We have to give ourselves to her. Down that road we will be sorely disappointed. The earth as our goddess leaves us stuck on earth, stuck in our dying, stuck in the brutal violence of nature, trying to save what ultimately cannot save us.

**Rainbow.** There's magic in a rainbow after a summer shower. It thrills us. We take pictures and text them to our friends. We call others to look. Colors in the sky give hope. There's a glory above our chaos and madness. The rainbow was a sign of God's promise to guard the earth by undergirding day and night, seasons and years. Rainbows also symbolize the joining of all colors in one. Each one distinct; each one contributing to the beauty of the whole bow. That's a great symbol for the wonder and worth of all people of all sizes, colors, shapes and personalities.

Rainbows are also the symbol for a powerful alternate story. The rainbow means I am just fine as I am, and you have to accept me for how I am and what I do. The problem in life is that you won't accept me. Because you're bad and mean. And the goal of life is to assert myself, my pride, until you bless me. The purpose of life, then, is to wage war against anyone who won't tell me I am great and glorious. The problem, of course, is that demanding acceptance does not create internal acceptance. Making you act like you accept me does not silence the voices inside me. And the reality is, every color of the rainbow of humanity shares the same internal problem. We are sinful. We are not OK. And the problem is not out there with mean people. It's in here with sinful me.

**Red.** Red is the color of passion. The color of war's passion and love's passion. We need warriors. Those who will sacrifice to shed their blood or to live with blood on their hands that our streets might be safe and our world protected. We need lovers. People who will ardently pursue relationships of love with passion and commitment. But if red becomes our god, trouble erupts. If we think we can solve the human predicament and vanquish life's Philistine's with red power alone, we will be left angry and harming all our days, and we will not prevail. If we follow red love's passion alone, we will see disordered desire ruin lives. Red's alternate story sings sweetly, "You can't help what you love." "Love is never wrong." These are outrageous lies. They flow from idols which lead us straight to the pit.

But there is another kind of red that I believe is the right color, the only color that can lead us along the path that Solomon gave the people. The path of repentance, confession, atonement and into deliverance and life and peace. This is

the red of Christ. The red love of his passion for humanity. God who is spirit took up red blood and walked among us as Jesus Christ. Christ Tomlin's song reminds us, "At the cross, love ran red and my sin washed white." I require something to cleanse me of stain of sin within. And the blood stains of what I have done. Shouting my pride in myself will never get the stain out. Amassing all the money in the world will not get the stain out. Saving the earth or finding the ideal partner will not in themselves get the stain out. Only the red of the blood of Christ washed me white. I only get that blood of Christ when I put away the alternate stories. When I turn from the idols in green, rainbow and even red, and rely wholly and only on Christ himself. We reconnect to God when we get the color right.