

Marks of Revival

by Nigel Lee

This sermon delves into the theme of revival, examining a biblical account of revival in 1 Samuel 3-7. It highlights the need for confession of sin, a return to the Lord with all hearts, putting away foreign gods, and a renewed dependence on God. The sermon emphasizes the importance of pouring out one's heart in confession, offering sacrificial commitments to God, and setting up memorial stones to remember encounters with the Lord.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:1, 1 Samuel 7:3, Lamentations 2:19, 1 Samuel 7:9, 1 Samuel 7:12

Topics: "Revival", "Confession and Commitment"

Description

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Transcript

Well, good afternoon. I hope you find my voice a little bit clearer. My family normally complain a lot that I talk so loud that they get blasted out of their seats.

I think it was long years training in open air preaching in India. I think I better ask if I'm talking too loud that you wave your hands to me and I'll try and simmer down. Welcome here for this afternoon's convention meeting.

As I said last night, I was a schoolteacher for some time and the boys and girls that were called back for special classes during the lunch hour were always the ones that had been disobedient or very slow in the morning. So I suppose you're on detention or something. Anyway, we're going to look into the Word of God again this afternoon for half an hour or 40 minutes or so.

There has been in recent years much talk of revival. It seems to me, and my memory goes back long enough, that we have been told every two or three years in this country that revival is just around the corner or that we're on the brink of it, it's coming, just wait and see. And I thought therefore it would be helpful in this afternoon's session if we have a look at a biblical account of a revival in Scripture and just examine what the Holy Spirit draws out from a particular passage.

It's in the Old Testament, a time when the fires were burning low in Israel, when God's people were actually in a much worse state than they thought they were in, and the Lord came in an unmistakable way and revived them. It's in 1 Samuel and we're going to be looking at verses between chapters 3 and chapter 7. The first book of Samuel, and we'll start in chapter 3, and we'll trust the Holy Spirit to apply it to our hearts, our nation, our churches. 1 Samuel 3 and verse 1 first of all.

I'm reading from the New International Version. The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare, there were not many visions.

And then after God had spoken to Samuel and that message of the judgment had been passed on to Eli for his whole family, then we come to verse 21. The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word, and Samuel's word came to all Israel. And then you remember how the Philistines came up to do battle against Israel and the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the battle line after the first day's reversal, and on the second day the disaster was even worse, and the very Ark of the Covenant of God was captured by the enemies of the people of God, the Philistines.

And then time went by and we come into chapter 7, 1 Samuel 7, and here we'll concentrate a little more. Verse 2, it was a long time, 20 years in all, that the Ark remained at Kiriath Jearim and all the people of Israel mourned and sought after the Lord. And Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, if you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourself to the Lord and serve him only and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.

So the Israelites put away their baals and their Ashtoreths and served the Lord only. Then Samuel said, assemble all Israel at Mizpah and I will intercede with the Lord for you. When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord.

On that day they fasted and they confessed, we have sinned against the Lord. And Samuel was leader of Israel at Mizpah. When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled at Mizpah, the rulers of the Philistines came up to attack them.

And when the Israelites heard of it, they were afraid because of the Philistines. They said to Samuel, do not stop crying out to the Lord our God for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines. Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering to the Lord.

And he cried out to the Lord on Israel's behalf and the Lord answered him. While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle. But that day the Lord thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites.

The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth-kar. Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shem, and he named it Ebenezer, saying, thus far has the Lord helped us. So the Philistines were subdued and did not invade Israelite territory again.

There was a condition of deep moral and spiritual darkness in Israel. And part of the reason was that the religious leadership of the nation was actually promoting immorality and ungodliness among the people, instead of rebuking it. If you turn back to chapter 2 verse 12, we see this, Eli's sons were wicked men.

They had no regard for the Lord. And in verse 17, this sin of the young men, this stealing from the offerings of the Lord, was very great in the Lord's sight, for they were treating the Lord's offering with contempt. And Eli their father, the priest, was so lacking in spiritual authority that when he tried to rebuke them, they simply paid him no regard at all.

In chapter 3 verse 13, we read at the end of that verse that he failed to restrain them. His sons made themselves contemptible and he failed to restrain them. And the marginal reference explains it this way, he did not even frown upon them.

All this was going on around him in his own family, and he didn't even raise an eyebrow. They were self-indulgent, these two sons of Eli, they were using their high office just to please themselves. Ordination for them was merely a route to making money and to sexual license, and they had no thought at all for the God in whose service they stood.

And not only were they going their own rebellious way, but they were actually leading others of God's people into thinking the same way, and then into sin, moral sin. The chief duty of a priest at this time was to maintain the sense of the reality of God in the midst of the humdrum affairs of life. To bring to people a sense of the reality of that other world that we were thinking about last night, the reality of God himself.

When the spiritual leaders of a nation become a law unto themselves, without regard for God, we need a revival. We need it to rescue us from them, among many other reasons. And there's clear evidence as we get into these early chapters of 1 Samuel, that idolatry was actually spreading amongst the people of God, because where the leaders lead, the people will inevitably follow.

And what was happening was that the God who had rescued Israel, the God of Revelation, the God of Scripture, the God who had brought them out of Egypt, the God who had manifested himself in the years, the decades gone by, in so many wonderful ways, that God was no longer being listened to, he was being elbowed aside, and other things were taking his place. So by the time you come to chapter 4, we find there one of the lowest points in Israel's history. Israel defeated in battle, and the Ark of the Covenant stolen.

But why not? Why should God step in at that point, and preserve for them the title deeds of their covenant, if the people in their hearts have no further interest in keeping that covenant? Why should God continue in the charade of maintaining the Ark at the very heart of the people, the Ark containing the law of God, written with his own finger on Mount Sinai, the basis upon which they were to relate to him, if the people themselves no longer want to listen to that word? So the Philistines came up against them, huge big men, all of them second cousins to Goliath, in the latest high-tech armor, and with Iron Age weaponry, and who is Israel? If they no longer have regard for the God that had offered to go in the midst of them, if they don't really want him in the midst of them, who are they compared with any other people on earth? They are nobodies, and the Philistines didn't find it all that difficult. The Ark was brought into the battle line, but if you have no regard for what the symbols convey, then it is simply an old wooden box with no magical power to do anything. They can shout and sing and dance and make noise all they liked, as the Ark was brought in amongst them.

It doesn't mean that much, and 30,000 foot soldiers were cut down and slaughtered in that battle in 1 Samuel 4. Husbands, fathers, sons, who would never come home from that battle, because the spiritual leaders of the nation had led the people into selfishness and blindness and idolatry. Families broken from then on, children crying, farms left ruined. These are the consequences of the kind of disobedience that had been gradually springing up within the life of Israel at this time.

For that reason I call it one of the lowest points in Israel's history. And if you were to read the whole of chapter 4 verse 1, you see that the name of that battlefield, that battle site, was Ebenezer. It was up in the north.

The irony is enough to make your blood run cold. Israel went to fight the Philistines in a place that had already been named, up to this point the Lord has helped us. And they left their dead on the battlefield and came home in utter shame, because the Lord helped them no more.

And if we have in this country religious leaders who erect no fences at all in our nation and in the public conscience against public immorality and private self-indulgence, if we have people who are losing the experience of what it is to listen attentively to the Word of God, we can have our history, we can have our religious professionals, we can have a decibel level rising, but we are in desperate need. Well that's the downside. What happens next? What does God do about this situation? He begins in a very small way with a young man.

In chapter 3 we read of the boy Samuel. That word boy is actually the same word used a little bit later of David at the age he was when he went and slew Goliath. So I take it to be a kind of early young teenager probably.

Much the same sort of age as many of the young people in the youth work here this week. Pray for them. God begins to work in the heart and the mind of young Samuel and he starts to listen to God and then he begins to speak as a young man and the people begin to listen to Samuel and they know that God was speaking through him.

The Word of God had been rare at the beginning of chapter 3 and by the time we get to verse 20 in chapter 3, the people the length and breadth of the land know that God's voice can be heard through this young man as he grows up. God not merely present in inverted commas through the ark, but actually living, speaking, addressing folk where they were. Chapter 7 Samuel has a message for the people and it's summarized for us in verse 3 of chapter 7. He had three things to say.

Though revival I believe can never be stereotyped, there are certain things which seem to be essential all the time. Chapter 7 verse 3, Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, if you're returning to the Lord with all your heart, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and asterisks and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines. Number one, return to the Lord with all your heart, without reserve, without regret, back to him.

That's the crux of it. They'd grown cold. They'd been walking a long way behind the Lord.

Now they wanted to listen and walk with him again. Return to him. And secondly, put away these strange gods, these gods that don't belong to you, that should have no part at all in your family life, your national life, put them away.

Baal was the male fertility god of the local Canaanites and Ashtoreth was Baal's female companion. And the worship of the pair of them, Baal and Ashtoreth, involved every kind of unimaginable carnality. They were the gods of Israel's enemies, not just the little idols much beloved by the Canaanites and the Philistine enemies all around.

These were gods who represented the very spiritual forces that would attack and destroy the people of God inwardly. We face the same kind of thing, the love of money, love of pleasure, love of luxury, of

laziness, of the soft life. No compromise, says Samuel.

Throw them out of your house. Put these things away and serve the Lord only and here's a promise, he will deliver you. Even after all you've said and done, God as we learned this morning, is gracious.

He will rescue you and he did. That voice which had begun to speak so quietly to Samuel in the night, that same voice then thundered out against the enemy during the day and the Philistines were scattered. Four marks of true revival here in 1 Samuel 7. First is this, confession of sin.

A sense and awareness of the reality of the hatefulness of sin and of God's grace when you turn. I grew up in a Christian home for which I am now very grateful, but I suppose like many from that kind of background, familiarity through my teens bred a kind of mixed faith. Familiarity can breed contempt.

It can train you in ways of appearing publicly in the way that people expect you to, but actually your heart be very mixed, be interested in all kinds of other things. And God in his wisdom, once I left school and worked for a little time in a factory, allowed me to go out for some months, five or six months, before I was going to go on to college, went out to East Africa. And I found myself there in the midst of what came to be known historically as the East African revival movement.

And I can remember sitting on a hillside in southwest Uganda, covered with people listening to the preaching of the Word of God, and it was sharp. God was speaking to me again. It was as if God's mercy and grace and forgiveness for very real sin would break in upon people, and they couldn't restrain themselves.

It's like John last night, they would break out into singing. And I'm right now resisting the temptation to sing what they used to sing, Tuku tendere za yesu, that song that would just lift up and echo around the hillside. Because people were dealing with real sin.

I remember years later, being involved with a friend of mine, who has spoken here from this platform, in some revival meetings, the nearest thing I perhaps ever came to revival in Northern Ireland. A brother was preaching in these meetings, and it was intense, this sense of the reality of the awesomeness of God's holiness and judgment. And there was a little caravan parked at the back of the hall.

And every now and again, as we sat there listening to the preacher, people would get up out of their seats, and with tears streaming down their face, would go out the back of the meeting, into the caravan, break down, get help, talk to someone, get right with the Lord, and then come back into the meeting, and sit down, and sort of look around at people with joy all over their face. God was dealing with us. There was a real sense of conviction of sin upon the place.

You know the stories of the revival in the Hebrides, 1949, 50, 51, around that time. Fishermen sailing past those islands, would just come under conviction of sin, and leave their fishing, and turn into port, in order to find someone who could help them get right with God. People out on their hillsides, on their farms, in their fields, broken with the sense of the presence of God.

This has marked lasting revivals, times of real blessing, all down through history. Verses five and six, Samuel gathered the people together, all who could come to a great prayer meeting at Mizpah. This was just about seven miles north of Jerusalem, and we read that they poured out water before the Lord.

They drew water, and poured it out there in verse six. It was a symbol, an Old Testament symbol, of the confession of sin. Lamentations, the book of Lamentations, chapter 2, verse 19, says these words, arise, cry out in the night, as the watches of the night begin, pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord.

On that day they fasted, and confessed, we have sinned against the Lord. And we read that Samuel was the leader, it says, of Israel at Mizpah, literally was the judge. Why did he say that suddenly at that point, when describing this dealing with sin, this getting right with God? Why did it suddenly say Samuel was the judge? It's because there were things to settle.

They were coming probably, and confessing, perhaps bad relationships with neighbors, quarrels that needed facing up to, dealing with. There were sleepers to awake, and relationships to sort out. Samuel was moving around amongst the people, helping them get right with God, clear their account, their debt.

When the people became serious about calling sin, sin, and seeking God's mercy, then some of these old blockages in relationships were suddenly loosed, and things were judged. First great mark of this revival, letting God speak about sin, not trying to hide, dealing with. Secondly, verses seven and eight, a whole new dependence on God.

When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled, they came up to attack them. When the Israelites heard, they were afraid. So they turned to Samuel and said, keep praying that God may rescue us from the hand of the Philistine.

Not trusting in the ark anymore, but in the Lord, the living Lord, the God of Samuel. You see, the real battle had actually been inside them, wasn't with the Philistines at all, that's the inside. And then thirdly, they made a sacrificial offering to the Lord.

Verse nine, Samuel took a sucking lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering. Can you feel the tension? Just imagine the situation. They have gathered for this great prayer meeting.

Samuel is in their midst, and over the hillside come the Philistines. What are they going to do? Samuel holds them, standing their ground in faith, as the enemy gets closer and closer and closer. They go through this experience, Samuel leading them, of saying, God first.

We must render up our gifts and our offerings to God first. He is the Lord. Not going to panic, we're going to trust him.

And so they made their offering to the Lord, because he alone was worthy. And then fourthly, the Lord intervened in their situation. He suddenly shouted out of heaven, it was an extraordinary situation.

God perhaps hadn't spoken like that since Mount Sinai. When the children of Israel had asked, please never again Lord, you speak to Moses, don't talk direct to us like this, we can't bear it. Suddenly God appeared out from behind a cloud, and made the Philistines run.

I don't know what he said, he just thundered at them, stop, go back. Sent them packing. They didn't even have to fight, because God spoke.

They didn't lose any fathers and sons and brothers that day. God spoke from heaven powerfully, his voice was heard. This was the first real victory that Israel ever won against the Philistines, you know.

They won plenty more under David, but up to this point, every time they'd faced a Philistine, they'd lost. Only now, when they turned back to the Lord and put him first, and let God speak, that they began to experience victory. And Samuel, when the day was over, when they pursued their enemies, he decided to rename the place.

Called it Ebenezer. He named it deliberately with the same name that had been the name of the battle that they had lost in chapter four. If you study the text closely, you'll see that they were two quite different places.

The first one was up north, near Aphek, called Ebenezer, where they'd been sent running with their tails between their legs. And now Samuel calls them together and says, let's call this place Ebenezer. The Lord helps us.

Let's reclaim this ground and put up a memorial stone here, by which we will remember this experience. So I'm going to conclude. You've been in your lunch hour detention long enough.

But as we come to an end, just to help you remember the chapter. Three symbols. Let's apply them.

They poured out water. They offered a sacrifice. They raised up a stone.

We're helped sometimes, aren't we? If the thought processes that go on inside us can be related to a place or an object. Will you take a walk this week? Will you ever be away from this tent? If the weather improves, will you go somewhere? You hardly want to confess, do you? Will you go alone? Will you sit by a stream? By yourself? Will you do business with God? Will you take water and let it run through your fingers? As you pour out your heart in confession, is it? Thanksgiving? To God? Go and do it somewhere. Look around then at that scene.

Lord, as I pour out this water before you, I want to express my heart. I want you to come and fill me, top to bottom, through and through. No hidden corners.

I'm yours. Is the Lord asking some of you for a sacrifice? Perhaps of recommitment? Something that has been on your heart or just at the edge of your conscience for some time? Something the Lord is saying, I want you to give that over to me. Let me take it and use it.

A place somewhere in these hills, in this town. Maybe you sit where someone else has sat before in these hundred and twenty years of kessing. And make your fresh, sacrificial commitment to the Lord Jesus, just as Samuel stood with that little lamb and he offered it up to the Lord.

All of us on Friday night, as we gather here for the communion service, as we serve each other, as we rejoice quietly together at God's lamb offered up for us. Surely we will want to recommit our lives. Let the Lord have whatever we can give.

And the memorial stone? I know some people who, I don't know whether they should or not, but in memory of certain experiences or places where they've met the Lord, they pick up perhaps a stone, put it in their pocket. I guess over the years the whole of Skidaw could have been removed. They take it home, put it on their mantelpiece.

They remember that that was just a little piece of rock that was down beside them as they were having time with the Lord, seeking his face, longing for a fresh filling of his spirit. Or maybe if you want,

somewhere, put up your own little memorial stone. And if you come back next year or the year after, go and see if it's still there.

Thank the Lord for his faithfulness, watching over you, keeping you. Do you have those kind of places around the world? I remember the tree under which I sat in Southwest Uganda and gave the Lord my life forever. I haven't been back to see it.

But I imagine it in my head. I know certain rooms, certain chairs by which I have knelt, certain streets I've walked, pavements I have trodden in tears. We need these places, don't we? What about a memorial stone for you this week? We long for revival.

We long for just a quiet, close, real walk with God. Pour out your water. Offer your sacrifice.

Set up your stone. That's what they did here. May God help us to apply these things as we should, each of us.

Keswick 95. Let us pray. Lord, we thank you for your servant, Samuel, and the way in which he fades out of the picture in this book as David takes center stage.

Oh, God, we praise you for great David's greater son, the Lord Jesus, and for the sense even this afternoon of him drawing near, opening our eyes and our hearts, and looking for the response that we want to give. Seal over this word in our hearts, we pray, and help us to obey for his glory's sake. Amen.

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