

SERMON I Samuel 7:4-12
HEARING AND FEARING

So the children of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and served the Lord only. And Samuel said, "Gather all Israel to Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you." So they gathered together at Mizpah, drew water, and poured it out before the Lord. And they fasted that day, and said there, "We have sinned against the Lord." And Samuel judged the children of Israel at Mizpah.

Now when the Philistines heard that the children of Israel had gathered together at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the children of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines. So the children 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."

And Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. Then Samuel cried out to the Lord for Israel, and the Lord answered him. Now as Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel. But the Lord thundered with a loud thunder upon the Philistines that day, and so confused them that they were overcome before Israel. And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and drove them back as far as below Beth Car. Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen, and called its name Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the Lord has helped us."

Does "hearing" lead to "fearing." It can! And actually in two different ways, as we see in our text.

The events of this text take place before the Children of Israel had a king. The prophet of the Lord and the elders of the people were leading the nation. The Children of Israel had suffered a defeat in battle against the Philistines. The Philistines were a neighboring idol-worshipping people. 4000 Israelite casualties fell that day. Ordinarily Israel, the Lord's people--the people from whom the Son of God would enter this life in flesh and blood--were given victory over ungodly and idol-worshipping nations around them. How then this defeat? The elders of Israel thought they figured it out. They decided to go to the Worship Tabernacle (a tabernacle was a movable tent-type structure), remove the Ark of the Covenant, and take it to the battle front.

What was this Ark of the Covenant? Do not confuse it with "ark" of Noah--that was a huge ship on which Noah, his family, and 2 of every air-breathing animal survived during the world-wide flood. The word "ark" is actually a term for an enclosed fixture in which items are kept safe--perhaps something as big as a ship, or as small as a chest. The ark under discussion here was a wooden chest, which the Lord had commanded to be built. Its dimensions were roughly 2' x 2' x 4'. It was overlaid with gold. Inside the ark were the two tablets of stone that Moses had received from the Lord atop Mt. Sinai. These two Testimonies contained the Ten Commandments and likely other portions of the covenant and promises of God as well. There was a cover over the ark with two golden angels whose wingtips touched. By God's command this cover would be sprinkled with the blood of atonement for the sins of the people once each year. God's presence would abide with the Children of Israel above the atonement cover of the ark. The ark was not to be moved from the Tabernacle unless God so indicated.

Foolishly the Israelites took the Ark into battle, as if the Lord would, or could, only help them if they carried His presence to the battle front. Had they forgotten that God is a spirit, present everywhere? Had they begun to think of the worship items at the Tabernacle as some sort of magic charms? Do you think that if you took the cross home from the church altar that God would bless your home? As if a good luck charm? Do you think that if you just physically go to church, that then God will grant you a good week? God was and is displeased with such mockery. Israel suffered another defeat. Plus the Philistines took the Ark from them! In due time, God forced the Philistines to return it, but it was not taken to the Tabernacle. It was kept elsewhere.

This is the timeframe of our text for today. The people were longing for the ark's return to their worship Tabernacle. It had been gone 20 years! Why hadn't God instructed them to take it back? The people acted as if they couldn't connect the dots--the Ark of the Covenant was gone from the tabernacle, and the Philistines ruled over them. What was up? The prophet Samuel had to point their faces right to it. "Put away the foreign gods from among you, Baals and the Ashtoreths, gods of the Canaanites, and serve the Lord only!" But the Israelites were having fun worshipping the gods of nature of the Canaanites, gods of fertility and of sensual love. They thought they could have their cake and eat it too, that they could worship the Lord **and** the gods of the Canaanites at the same

time. Samuel told them to worship the Lord ONLY. They “heard” him, and they knew. They realized their trespass. They “feared” the consequences. They repented. They put away the other gods and worshiped the Lord ONLY. They gathered at Mizpah with Samuel and poured out water before the Lord, as if pouring out their hearts. They fasted, serving the Lord instead of serving the belly. They confessed, “We have sinned against the Lord” and wandered from His love for us. They repented seeking His forgiveness.

Whom or what do you think you can worship right along with the Lord? Is it the “nature gods” of our age? Body beautiful—after all you deserve it? Books and screens filled with fertility rites—only skip the fertility and just have the fun? So-called science which denies our Lord, our sin, our Savior, and heaven? Do you conclude you can worship the Lord and at the same time support an ideology that says human beings mutated up from apes? Can you connect the dots and see that such displeases God? He does not want hearts divided. “Worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve” (Matthew 4:10). God does not bless sin. God does not bless sin. Connect the dots. Like Israel, put away all that has pushed into equal place with God in your heart and in your life. Like the Israelites, return to the Lord: “God be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13).

We read that after the people’s confession Samuel “judged” Israel at Mizpah. To “judge” has a negative and a positive side. The negative side is “to condemn.” But the people here had already admitted their sin and were seeking mercy of God. Samuel wasn’t condemning them now, was he? To “judge” also means “to defend and to deliver,” as when one is seeking a judgment from the court for work still owed by a contractor. Samuel “judged” the people, delivering them from their guilty consciences, from the punishment they deserved, assuring them of the Lord’s mercy and compassion, all in the promise of the coming Savior. The people “heard” these words with joy and relief, and now “feared”—but not in the sense of terror, rather in the sense of respect and love for the Lord, more than ever before. Forgiven! The same is true for you. Hear the good news of God’s judgment in your favor for Jesus’ sake. Relish that grace and mercy from God! Respect, honor, and hold Him in awe—“fear” Him.

The sinful flesh is very weak. Unexpectedly Israel “heard” that the Philistines had gathered for an attack upon them while they were at worship before the Lord at Mizpah. They “feared.” *They were afraid of the Philistines.* They doubted the Lord. They 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.” When you hear of trouble coming, whether the weather or the enemy, trust in the Lord of mercy, put away all other gods from your heart. Do not fear.

Samuel offered a special sacrifice to the Lord for them. It was an “olah” in Hebrew—an offering wholly/completely—burned up to the Lord. The text says, Samuel prayed, and the Lord answered. When fears swamp you, who prays to the Father for you? The pastor? Yes, the pastor. But who even greater than that? Jesus your Savior and intercessor! He is your go-between, who goes to the Father for you. “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34) “It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us! Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? !” (Romans 8:34-35). Jesus prays for you!

The Philistines drew near to battle against Israel. But the Lord thundered with a loud thunder upon the Philistines that day, and so confused them that they were overcome before Israel! Thunder! Loud thunder! It is very unnerving. Whether lightning bolts were involved here as well is not stated. If not, imagine loud thunder coming from a blue sky! The Philistines knew God was against them. They panicked! They were defeated by Israel. The foes that come upon you are no better. Be wholly devoted to the Lord and serve Him only. Let Him thunder against all who want to bring you harm—no matter who the opponent. “If God is for us, who can be against us? He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him freely give us all things?” (Romans 8:31-32). Even Satan himself is defeated. On that score, imagine the blow Satan suffered on Easter Sunday morning, when Christ like a thunderclap returned to life and descended into hell to trumpet His victory! That is the Savior whom you “hear and fear”—not in terror; but in honor, respect, reverence, and glory! He paid our price so that we are forgiven! We cling to Him by faith. Thus we who are in Christ hear and “fear”—in the good sense—the Lord. Not the fear of condemnation, but the fear and awe of salvation.

Samuel set up a stone-memorial and called it “Ebenezer”—Hebrew for “Stone of Help.” Jesus is your Ebenezer, your stone of help. “*Thus far—to this point—the Lord has helped us!*” To this point—in your work, in your life, in your marriage, in your health, with your daily bread, with your eternal salvation. Ebenezer, a stone of victory! When you hear that term—if you have turned away from God, hear and fear in dread. If you know your sins are covered in the blood and righteousness of Jesus, hear and fear in wonder and respect!

Amen! So be it!

Pastor Kanzenbach---