

1 Samuel – Week 7 – Return unto the Lord – Bible Study Helps

Title: Return Unto the Lord:

Sermon Summary: Drawing from 1 Samuel 7, this sermon presents a straightforward yet profound call for God's people to return to Him with wholehearted devotion. The sermon traces Israel's 20-year period of lamenting without true repentance, showing how Samuel's ministry of preaching and prayer ultimately led the nation back to God. The sermon distinguishes between regret, remorse, and genuine repentance, emphasizing that true return to the Lord requires forsaking idols, preparing the heart, and serving God exclusively. When Israel finally turned back to God in sincerity, He defeated their enemies through miraculous intervention, demonstrating that dependence on God rather than religious objects or worldly solutions is the only path to victory. The sermon closes with a call to remember God's faithfulness and to keep the Christian life simple: hear the Word, forsake sin, run to God, and depend on Him for everything.

Key Points:

- Israel spent 20 years lamenting their condition without taking genuine steps toward repentance, illustrating the difference between mourning over sin and truly turning from it
- True repentance involves three progressive steps: moving beyond regret and remorse into genuine repentance, which requires action and a change of direction
- Returning to the Lord requires forsaking competing idols and divided loyalties, as God demands exclusive devotion and will not share worship with the world's priorities
- Samuel's ministry model of preaching and prayer is presented as the foundational and sufficient approach to spiritual leadership and congregational health
- When God's people get right with Him and unite together, the enemy immediately responds with opposition, meaning obedience to God should be expected to bring spiritual resistance
- God intervenes supernaturally on behalf of His people when they depend on Him rather than on their own strategies, religious objects, or worldly resources
- Godly sorrow, as described in 2 Corinthians 7, produces fruit including carefulness, zeal, and a decisive turning from sin, distinguishing it from the sorrow the world produces
- The Ebenezer stone set up by Samuel serves as a reminder that memorializing God's faithfulness helps future generations maintain trust in Him rather than drifting toward self-reliance
- Anxiety and worry are indicators that a believer has not fully cast their burdens upon the Lord, and the solution is to bring those burdens to God and leave them with Him
- Samuel's faithful lifetime of service, centered on the Word of God and prayer, produced lasting peace and victory for Israel throughout his days

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Scripture Reference:

- 1 Samuel 7:1-17 (primary passage)
- 2 Corinthians 7:9-11 (godly sorrow leading to repentance)
- 2 Kings 23 (Josiah's sweeping removal of idols from the land and temple)

Stories:

- The account of the ark being kept at Kirjath-Jerim for 20 years while Israel lamented without truly returning to God, setting the stage for Samuel's call to repentance
- Samuel's gathering of all Israel at Mizpah, where the people fasted, confessed sin, and sought the Lord, followed by the Philistine advance and God's thunderous defeat of the enemy
- The story of King Josiah in 2 Kings 23, used as a parallel example of wholehearted repentance, in which Josiah systematically destroyed every idol, high place, and pagan worship site throughout the land upon hearing the Word of God
- The earlier narrative from 1 Samuel 4-6, referenced as contrast, in which Israel trusted the ark itself to bring victory and suffered devastating defeat, compared to chapter 7 where they trusted God directly and received victory
- The account of God returning the ark by means of two milk cows from the previous week's sermon, used to illustrate that God will accomplish His purposes with or without willing human instruments

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Discipleship Questions

The sermon describes Israel spending 20 years lamenting after the Lord without truly returning to Him -- in what ways might modern believers fall into the same pattern of mourning their spiritual condition without taking decisive steps toward repentance?

Samuel's ministry was described as simply preaching the Word of God and praying, which some might consider boring or insufficient -- how does this simple approach challenge our expectations of what effective spiritual leadership should look like?

The distinction between regret, remorse, and repentance is central to this message -- can you identify a time in your own life when you stopped at regret or remorse and never moved into true repentance, and what held you back?

Israel in 1 Samuel 4 ran to the ark to save them, while in 1 Samuel 7 they ran to God in prayer -- what are the modern equivalents of the ark that we tend to trust in times of crisis instead of turning directly to God?

The sermon points out that when Israel gathered together and got right with God, the Philistines immediately mobilized against them -- how does this pattern of opposition following obedience shape the way you interpret the difficulties that arise when you pursue spiritual renewal?

Samuel is described as a type of Christ in his role as intercessor, offering the lamb and crying out to God on behalf of the people -- how does understanding Jesus as your intercessor change the way you approach prayer and confession?

The sermon emphasizes that God wants exclusive devotion, declaring that you cannot serve God and idols simultaneously -- what are the subtle or socially acceptable idols in contemporary life that most easily divide the hearts of believers?

King Josiah's response to hearing the Word of God was radical and thorough, destroying every trace of idolatry with what the sermon called a kind of holy recklessness -- what would that level of seriousness about sin actually look like in your own daily life?

The stone of Ebenezer was set up so that future generations would remember God's faithfulness rather than crediting their own efforts or religious objects -- what memorials or practices do you have in your life to guard against forgetting how God has worked on your behalf?

The sermon closes with the observation that anxiety and worry are signs that a believer has not truly cast their burdens on the Lord -- what is the difference between acknowledging that God is in control and actually living as though He is, and what makes that transition so difficult?

Small Group Guide: Return Unto the Lord

Based on 1 Samuel 7

Overview

This session explores one of the most practical passages in 1 Samuel. After twenty years of lamenting without truly acting, Israel finally returned to God through genuine repentance, dependent prayer, and exclusive devotion. Samuel's ministry of preaching and prayer resulted in a miraculous victory over the Philistines. The message is simple: when God's people return to Him with whole hearts, He takes care of everything else.

Key Takeaways

- God's Word confronts sin and provides the clear path back to Him.
 - Genuine repentance involves more than regret or remorse. It requires a decisive turn away from sin and toward God.
 - A divided heart cannot fully serve God. Competing idols must be put away.
 - Dependence on God in prayer is not a last resort. It is the first and right response to every threat.
 - God fights for His people when they are close to Him and wholly surrendered to Him.
 - Remembering God's faithfulness protects against drifting back into sin and self-reliance.
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Getting Started

Use one of these questions to open discussion and help the group warm up to the topic.

1. Think of a time when you tried to solve a major problem entirely on your own. How did that go?
 2. Have you ever gone through a season where you knew you needed God but kept putting off returning to Him? What kept you from taking that step?
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Discussion Questions

Part One: Preaching and Repentance (1 Samuel 7:1-4)

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1. Israel spent twenty years lamenting after the Lord without truly returning to Him. What is the difference between lamenting and repenting? Have you ever found yourself stuck in one without moving to the other?
2. The sermon distinguishes between three responses to sin: regret, remorse, and repentance. In your own words, how would you describe the difference? Which one do you find yourself stopping short at most often, and why?
3. Samuel's message was conditional: "If ye do return unto the Lord with all your hearts, then put away the strange gods." Why do you think God requires the removal of competing idols before He promises deliverance? What does that tell us about His character?
4. The sermon states: "You cannot expect God's blessing while deliberately holding on to the things that God has commanded you to forsake." How does that statement challenge or encourage you personally?
5. The idols Israel clung to were religious and cultural systems that mixed worship of God with immorality and worldliness. What forms do modern idols take in our lives? How do they subtly compete for our devotion without looking obviously wrong?

Part Two: Prayer and Dependence (1 Samuel 7:5-10)

6. Samuel's ministry was described as preaching and prayer. Why do you think those two things are consistently the foundation of effective ministry throughout Scripture? How do they work together?
7. In chapter 4, Israel's response to the Philistine threat was to fetch the ark. In chapter 7, their response was to ask Samuel to pray. What changed? What does that shift reveal about the condition of their hearts?
8. The Philistines came against Israel right after Israel got right with God. The sermon points out that obedience to God often brings opposition. Have you experienced that in your own life? How did you respond?
9. The sermon asks: "Where do you turn when the Philistines come to your house?" What is your honest first instinct when a crisis hits? What does that reveal about where your trust actually rests?
10. The Bible says in 1 Peter 5:7 that believers should cast all their cares on God because He cares for them. The sermon suggests that ongoing worry and anxiety may be a sign that we have not truly handed a burden over to the Lord. Do you agree with that? How do you practically go about releasing a burden to God rather than just praying about it and then picking it back up?

Part Three: Victory and Remembrance (1 Samuel 7:10-17)

11. God thundered against the Philistines while Samuel was still in the middle of offering the sacrifice. What does the timing of God's intervention tell us about His involvement in the details of our lives?
12. Samuel set up the stone called Ebenezer, meaning "hitherto hath the Lord helped us," as a physical memorial of God's faithfulness. Why is it important to intentionally remember what God has done? What happens when we forget?

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13. Psalm 78 describes Israel forgetting the works of the Lord. The sermon asks how a person forgets how good God has been. What are the conditions or habits that cause spiritual forgetfulness? What disciplines help guard against it?
 14. The chapter ends with Samuel faithfully judging Israel all the days of his life, returning to his hometown of Ramah where he also built an altar. The sermon summarizes this as: set up your house, do the work of the Lord, and keep the altar center stage. What would it look like practically for your home to reflect that pattern?
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Practical Applications

Choose one or more of the following to work on individually or discuss as a group this week.

Return with your whole heart. Take an honest inventory of your life. Ask God to show you any area where your heart is divided. Write it down. Confess it specifically to God and make a clear decision to forsake it.

Identify your idols. Think about where you instinctively turn when problems arise. Is it money, relationships, entertainment, social media, the opinions of others? Name it. Then take a deliberate step to put it in its proper place and redirect that dependence toward God.

Move from remorse to repentance. If there is an area of sin you have been grieving over without taking action, make a concrete plan this week to turn away from it. Repentance is not just a feeling. It is a direction.

Cast a specific burden on the Lord. Identify the worry or fear that is consuming the most mental energy in your life right now. Bring it to God in prayer, name it specifically, and then practice leaving it with Him throughout the week. When the anxiety returns, treat that as a prompt to pray again rather than a sign that prayer did not work.

Build your Ebenezer. Write down three to five specific ways God has helped you in the past year. Share at least one of them with your group. Keep the list somewhere visible as a reminder of His faithfulness.

Prioritize the assembly. The sermon points to the gathering of Israel at Mizpah as a picture of God's people coming together to seek Him. Evaluate your commitment to gathering with your church family for the Word and prayer. If that commitment has drifted, take a step to strengthen it this week.

Closing Thought

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The sermon's central challenge is this: the path back to God is simple, though not always easy. Put away what competes for your heart. Prepare your heart for the Lord. Serve Him only. Cry out to Him. And then watch what He does. Israel's story in 1 Samuel 7 is not just ancient history. It is a mirror for every believer who has wandered, lamented, and wondered why things are not getting better. The answer has always been the same. Return unto the Lord.

Closing Prayer

Close your time together by praying specifically for one another. Ask each group member to share one area where they need to either return to the Lord, release a burden, or trust God for a specific outcome. Pray over those needs together before you leave.

5-Day Bible Reading and Devotional Guide

Based on the Theme: Return Unto the Lord

Day 1: The Danger of a Divided Heart Reading: 1 Samuel 7:1-4

Devotional: For twenty years, Israel kept the ark on a hill while lamenting their distance from God. They mourned, yet they held onto their idols. They wanted God, but they also wanted the world. This is the portrait of a divided heart. God does not compete for your affection. He calls for complete devotion. The idols in your life may not be carved from stone, but they are real -- anything that competes with your wholehearted surrender to God qualifies. Examine your heart honestly today. What are you holding onto that God has asked you to release? Return to Him fully, not partially.

Personal Reflection: What competing priorities in your life are keeping you from wholehearted devotion to God?

Practical Application: Write down one thing that consistently divides your attention away from God. Bring it before the Lord in prayer and ask Him for the strength to forsake it.

Day 2: The Path Home Reading: 2 Corinthians 7:9-11; 1 Samuel 7:3

Devotional: There is a profound difference between regret, remorse, and repentance. Regret says, "I wish I had not done that." Remorse says, "I feel terrible about what happened." Repentance says, "I am turning away from this and running back to God." Israel had spent twenty years in regret and remorse without taking the final step. Samuel's message cut through their mourning with a clear call: return unto the Lord with all your heart. Godly sorrow, as Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 7, produces genuine change -- zeal, carefulness, and a clean break from sin. God has given you the path home. Walk it today.

Personal Reflection: Have you been sitting in regret or remorse without fully turning back to God? What would genuine repentance look like in your current situation?

Practical Application: Spend time in honest prayer today. Confess not just the sin, but the heart condition behind it. Ask God to produce in you the godly sorrow that leads to lasting change.

Day 3: The God Who Hears Reading: 1 Samuel 7:5-9; Philippians 4:6-7

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Devotional: When the Philistines threatened Israel, the people did not reach for the ark this time. They reached for God. They said to Samuel, "Cease not to cry unto the Lord our God for us." This was a dramatic shift from chapter 4, where they treated the ark like a lucky charm. Now they understood that God Himself was their only help. Samuel offered the lamb, prayed, and the text says plainly that the Lord heard him. God hears the prayers of His people when they come to Him in dependence and faith. Whatever enemy is advancing toward you today, God is not unaware, and He is not unmoved.

Personal Reflection: In times of fear or pressure, what is your first instinct -- to find a human solution or to cry out to God?

Practical Application: Identify one burden or fear you have been carrying on your own. Cast it upon the Lord today through specific, honest prayer. Leave it with Him and resist the urge to take it back.

Day 4: When God Thunders Reading: 1 Samuel 7:10-12; Psalm 46:1-3

Devotional: As Samuel offered the sacrifice and prayed, the Philistines drew near. Then God thundered. The enemy was routed -- not by Israel's military strength, but by the direct intervention of God on behalf of His people. Samuel then set up a stone and called it Ebenezer, meaning "hitherto hath the Lord helped us." This was not a monument to Israel's strategy. It was a monument to God's faithfulness. When you return to God, depend on Him, and trust His provision, He fights on your behalf in ways you could never arrange yourself. He has been faithful before. He will be faithful again.

Personal Reflection: Can you name specific moments in your life where God intervened on your behalf? Have you built a memorial of gratitude to remember His faithfulness?

Practical Application: Take time today to write down three specific instances where God provided, protected, or delivered you. Let these remembrances strengthen your faith for the challenges you currently face.

Day 5: A Life of Faithful Service Reading: 1 Samuel 7:15-17; Colossians 3:23-24

Devotional: Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. He traveled a circuit year after year -- Bethel, Gilgal, Mizpah -- faithfully preaching the Word of God and praying for the people. He returned home to Ramah, where he also built an altar to the Lord. His home and his ministry were inseparable. His entire life was an act of worship. This is the picture of a man who returned to the Lord and never turned back. God is not calling you to a dramatic moment of surrender alone. He is calling you to a lifetime of faithful, daily devotion -- in your home, in your work, in your worship, in everything.

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Personal Reflection: Is the altar of worship and devotion to God visible in your home and daily life, or is it reserved only for Sunday mornings?

Practical Application: Identify one practical way to make God more central in your daily routine this week -- whether through family prayer, personal Scripture reading, or simply beginning each morning in honest conversation with Him. Start today and commit to it for the remainder of the week.