

1 Samuel 7:2-17

The Centre of our Affections

Elijah and the prophets of Baal

I want to start today's talk by telling you one of my favourite stories in the Old Testament. It is found in 1 Kings 18 and it concerns one of the early great prophets of Israel – a man called Elijah.

Elijah was a prophet in the northern kingdom in the days of King Ahab.

King Ahab is one of Israel's most notoriously bad kings.

In fact, the writer of Kings sums up his reign in this way:

³⁰ Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him. ³¹ He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. ³² He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. ³³ Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him. [1 Kings 16:30-33 - NIV]

Anyway, this is just background to what happens.

What I want to tell you about is the day that Elijah threw out a challenge to Ahab.

Elijah wanted to show Ahab that the gods he had chosen to worship were false gods.

And so he told Ahab to gather all the people of Israel to Mount Carmel.

He urged Ahab to bring with him the eight hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and Asherah that he had on his payroll.

And so there is a huge gathering on Mount Carmel.

And Elijah turns to the people of God and says to them: 'How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.'

There was a stony silence from the people of God.

And then Elijah proposes his test.

The prophets of Baal will set up an altar for a sacrifice.

Elijah will set up an altar for a sacrifice.

And then each of them will call upon their God to start the fire.

The God who causes a fire to start will have shown himself to be the real God.

The prophets of Baal are the first to give it a try.

They build an altar and they begin to call upon Baal to do his stuff.

They are dancing and working themselves into a frenzy and shouting out to Baal.

And there is Elijah looking on.

And at noon, Elijah begins to have a go at them.

Shout louder!

Maybe Baal is deep in thought, or busy, or away travelling!

Or maybe he is just asleep and needs to be woken up!

Anyway, the prophets of Baal continue to work themselves up.

They begin cutting themselves with swords and engaging in self-mutilation.

But the day wears on and Baal is silent.

Nothing happens.

And so Elijah's turn comes.

And Elijah repairs the altar to the Lord that has fallen into disuse.

And he digs a trench around it and three times he pours water over the altar and sacrifice until the trench is filled with water.

And then he prays a simple prayer.

And God sends fire from heaven and the sacrifice is consumed along with the wood, stone and soil and the water in the trench.

And the people of God fall on their faces and cry out, 'The Lord – he is God! The Lord – he is God!'

What happens in this story is what happens from the second page of the Bible through to the last page.

God is a God who is always putting alternatives to his people.

He is always calling upon his people to look at the different options before them and to make some choices.

He is constantly telling them that there is an appropriate action and an inappropriate action.

One action will lead to God's honour and relationship with God.

The other will lead to God's dishonour and a breach of relationship with God.

Now the stories that we have been reading in 1 Samuel are less blatant than the story of Adam and

Even in the garden or the story of the people of God on Mount Carmel.

Nevertheless, in 1 Samuel God is putting alternatives before his people.

And as he does so, he is telling us how he wants his people to live.

He is telling the how he wanted them to live back then.

And he is telling us how he wants us to live now.

So, let's turn to 1 Samuel 7 and see what God has to teach us today.

What is this about?

Comparing 1 Samuel 7 and 1 Samuel 4

Now, my view is that the two alternatives approaches to God and the results that they bring are outlined in 1 Samuel 4 and 1 Samuel 7.

These chapters are the first and the last chapters in the story that is centred on the Ark of the Covenant.

So, the way we are going to have a look at 1 Samuel 7 is to look at it in relation to 1 Samuel 4.

You see, I think that there are very strong links between these two chapters.

The links are there in the language that is used.

And the links are there in the similarity of events.

So, let's get started.

The Problem

1 Samuel 4

- Israel has a military problem – the Philistines (4:1-2)

1 Samuel 7

- Israel has a spiritual problem – God seems distant and unapproachable (7:2)

Reflection and Consultation

1 Samuel 4

- There is a secular consultation – the elders and soldiers (4:3). The question ‘Why?’ is asked.

1 Samuel 7

- Samuel, a spiritual leader of Israel initiates a consultation with ‘the whole house of Israel’ (7:3). The question ‘Why?’ is presupposed.

Proposal

1 Samuel 4

- There is a decision to involve God (by manipulation through the Ark – 4:3 – ‘let him/it save us’)

1 Samuel 7

- There is a decision to involve God (through repentance – 7:3, 8 – ‘let him save/deliver).
- Note that this will also solve the Philistine problem as well – v 3.

Event

1 Samuel 4

- The Ark is brought (4:4).
- The Philistines are present (4:6)

1 Samuel 7

- Israel is gathered and God is sought through prayer, confession, and intercession (7:5-6).
- The Philistines appear (7:7).

The Battle

1 Samuel 4

- Israel is buoyed up and 'Shout'. The ground shakes. (4:5)
- The Philistines 'hear' and are afraid and decide to respond with human boldness (4:6-9).
- Two human armies do battle (4:10).
- God seems absent.

1 Samuel 7

- Israel is scared/fearful (7:7) and decide to respond by calling for spiritual help – God is called upon in prayer through Samuel (4:8-9).
- The Lord 'thunders', causes the Philistines to panic, and wars against the Philistines.
- God is very present.

The Results of the Battle

1 Samuel 4

- The Philistines win.
- Israel is severely defeated and humiliated (4:10-11).
- Corrupt religious leadership dies (4:11-18)

1 Samuel 7

- Israel wins.
- The Philistines are severely defeated and subdued (7:11-14).
- Samuel's godly leadership is endorsed.

Summary

1 Samuel 4

- A memorial to the defeat is enacted – a child is named 'Ichabod' – 'no glory'.

1 Samuel 7

- A memorial to the victory is enacted – a stone is named 'Ebenezer' – 'thus far has the Lord helped us'. The implication is that he will continue to help.

Drawing some conclusions

- Seeing the contrast and comparison

So, there is the story.

Now as we present it this way, it is easy to see what's going on, isn't it?

There is a strong and definite comparison and contrast being engaged in.

Here are the two options for God's people.

On the one hand they can look to their own human ability.

In this situation, they can pretend to involve God.

They can drag out the symbols of his presence such as priests and arks and other religious paraphernalia.

But in reality, he is not at the centre of their existence.

In these passages, God appears to be warning that there will be definite results from this sort of attitude.

This sort of attitude will remove or distance God.

It will distance God from his people.

Even though it will not result in God's defeat, it will result in his being dishonoured.

And it will result in his people being defeated and humiliated before the nations.

God will use the nations to rebuke his people just as he had done in their previous history during the time of the judges.

The other alternative is that God's people put God at the centre of their existence.

They do this by putting his word at the core of their life.

They do this by listening to the bearers of God's word.

And where this happens God will be exalted and glorified.

He will be united to his people.

And his people will live long in the land that the Lord their God gives them.

They will be protected and God will fight for them.

This is the choice that is before Israel.

Which way will they go?

Will they trust in horses and military might? (Psalm 20)

Will they go the way of seeking human solutions to their problems?

Or will they trust in the Lord their God who alone can solve their problems, even their military and political problems?

- The psyche of Israel

It's not an easy problem, is it?

After all, the chapters we have looked at over the past few weeks have let us into the psyche of Israel, haven't they.

And we have seen a nation of people who are tentative and scared.

They are a nation of peasants.

They are surrounded by strong and powerful enemies.

God has given them a patch of land between the most sophisticated and powerful nations on earth.

And they are scared.

And to trust a God who is free and sovereign and therefore seems somewhat unpredictable, is a risky venture.

It's like being in Hannah's shoes.

It's like being an infertile woman and somehow hoping against hope that God will reverse your infertility and give you a child.

It's like living in the constant expectation that God will do the miraculous and act against what appears to be the norm.

You know the theory that Hannah spelt out in 1 Samuel 2.

You know that it is not by strength that one prevails and that God will give victory to the weak.

But trusting this is no easy venture.

This is the choice facing the nation of Israel in these trying days.

Next week we will find out about the choice they make.

And I can tell you that it is not the one we would have hoped they would make.

[NB. Other verses to look at are Psalm 20 and Isaiah 30:15ff]

The centre of our affections

The demand on Israel is an ancient demand.

It was a demand to put faith in God no matter what.

It was a demand to make him the centre of their affections.

To love him with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their strength (Deuteronomy 6:2-4; cf. 1 Kings 11:2-4).

And it is this demand that God continues to put before us.

He puts it to us in the area of salvation.

He tells us that we must be people of faith...

That we must have faith that he is and that he is the rewarder of those who trust him (Hebrews 11).

That we must not be like the Israelites.

We must refuse to trust in our own efforts in order to please him.

Rather, we must trust that the death of Jesus is all that is required in order to make us right with God.

We enter relationship with God by being people totally dependent upon God.

And we go on in relationship with God by people totally dependent upon God.

The central claim of Biblical faith both in the Old and New Testaments is that we must look only to God in every need and in every circumstance.

He is to be the focus of life for us.

He is to be the centre of our affections, our decision making, our thoughts, our relationships, and our desires.

We are to love him with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength and with all our might.

This is God's great demand.

And I need to tell you that it is a demand that is hard and risky.

It is hard because it works against our normal disposition to trust ourselves and to work for our own good.

It makes you a dependent being.

And it is risky because it means putting yourself on the edge.

It means putting yourself at God's disposal for him to do with you as he wills.

And he may very well ask great and hard things of you.

But this is the life of God's people.

Isaiah called it a life of repentance and rest, of quietness and trust.

And it alone is a life of fullness.

And it alone results in God's honour and glory.

And it alone binds us to him.