

Broomfield



PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Ashes to Glory, Part 4

Spiritual Renewal

Last week during our congregational meeting we gazed upon Joshua 4:1-7 where Joshua placed a pile of stones in the Jordan River to mark that time when God's people went from death unto life, from being an uncircumcised, dispossessed people to being the covenant children of God.

In Genesis 32 we read of the time in Jacob's life when he wrestled with God. In the end he came out limping; yet he was spiritually revived!

During the reign of Josiah, the boy king, a copy of the Book of the Law was found in the temple.¹ This sparked a national revival which affected all Israel.

When the people of God returned from exile and heard the word of God preached, they fell to the ground in worship. They began to mourn over their sin! And thus we read these words:

Nehemiah 8:11-12, "So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be ye grieved. And all the people went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them."

One could go on and on referencing moments in the lives of God's people where these things happened:

- Rebellion was replaced with service.
- Compromise gave way to a zealously not known before.
- Indifference was exchanged for a holy passion for the Lord.

In fact the text at which we are looking details another example of the spiritual transformation that can occur in the life of a child of God — if they so desire it! For forty years, the people of God had been under the disciplining hand of the Lord² **and yet amazingly** they still did not yield or relinquish their futile claim on their own lives. But then seemingly out of nowhere, God's people respond to the preaching of the word of God. We see the message of Samuel propelling them to turn from their sin unto

¹ Compare 1 Kings 22:8-13

² Compare Judges 13:1

God.

Now, we are left wondering how this could happen. We find ourselves asking this question: What were the elements involved in this spiritual transformation?

Devotion to God

This brings us to the third element in Israel's spiritual renewal: Devotion. The first two components which lead to Israel's renewal were these:

- A keen sense of their brokenness.
- A turning from relying upon self unto God.
- And now the call of devotion.

1 Samuel 7:5, "And Samuel said, Gather all Israel to Mizpeh, and I will pray for you unto the LORD."

What is the significance of Mizpeh? Where was it? And why did Samuel call God's people there?

Mizpeh was a city approximately five miles³ north of Jerusalem. During the era of the Judges it most notably was the place where Israel gathered after the shock of hearing of Benjamin's sin — an incident which, in relation to our text, had just recently happened.⁴ Recall that the body parts of a ravished individual were circulated among God's people.

Judges 19:30, "And it was so, that all that saw it said, There was no such deed done nor seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day: consider of it, take advice, and speak your minds."

This is quite a significant reaction. For an act to be viewed as shocking in an era of complete and total lawlessness⁵ tells us something of the gravity of the sin. And so the text continues:

Judges 20:1, "Then all the children of Israel went out, and the congregation was gathered together as one man, from Dan even to Beersheba, with the land of Gilead, unto the LORD in Mizpeh."

How long had it been since God's people assembled as one man, with righteous indignation and actually cared about the things of the Lord?

It had been a long time since the people were fervent for Christ in the lawless era of the Judges. But then in this text, toward the end of the Judges, God's people assembled at Mizpeh for the purpose of upholding that which was righteous, just, and godly.

This shows us the significance of Mizpeh in the days of Samuel. Mizpeh had become a place associated with covenant fidelity.⁶ The people of Israel also gathered to Mizpeh at these times:

- When Samuel came into his own as a shepherd, 1 Samuel 7:15-16.

³ Or eight kilometers.

⁴ Recall that Judges 13 and the following overlap 1 Samuel 1-7.

⁵ Compare also Judges 17:6; 21:25

⁶ Compare 1 Samuel 7:16; 10:17

- When Saul was publicly chosen as king, 1 Samuel 10:17.
- And years later, during the Maccabean revolt.⁷

Thus Mizpeh became synonymous with spiritual devotion and commitment to the Lord. In fact, so much was the concept of devotion and commitment to the Lord attributed to this city, that just hearing about God's people gathering at Mizpeh was taken as an Israeli declaration of war on the part of the Philistines.⁸

So there is no question that when Samuel called God's people to Mizpeh, something enormous was taking place! Here the broken and penitent Israel would rededicate their lives to the Lord. In fact, that's the idea behind Samuel's promise of prayer:

1 Samuel 7:5, “And Samuel said, Gather all Israel to Mizpeh, and I will pray for you unto the LORD.”

In the context of 1 Samuel 7:2-4 there is no question as to Samuel's intentions. He is calling Israel to fidelity in their walk with God. He is stressing their commitment to the Lord whereby they would cast off any and all false gods. And he is directing their hearts to God whereby they would serve Him alone. And he is relying upon God's people responding accordingly.

Samuel's promise of prayer can be taken for nothing less than a prayer of consecration and renewed blessing from the Lord.

Truly at this point the subject of Samuel's prayer would NOT be for Israel's brokenness or repentance — for that had already occurred. Rather he is praying for Israel's diligence in being true to their passion to serve Christ.

From this we behold the third element to spiritual renewal: A Formal Act of Devotion!

This is a people broken by their sin and the absence of God in their lives. They have now turned from their sin unto God. And Israel is now formally dedicating themselves to Christ.

The Commitment Entailed

What did this “formal” act of dedication entail? What were they saying?

1 Samuel 7:6, “**And they gathered together to Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured it out before the LORD, and fasted on that day,** and said there, We have sinned against the LORD. And Samuel judged the children of Israel in Mizpeh.”

Two items are mentioned in this context: Water and food.

First, they poured out water. When God's people assembled, the first thing Samuel did was to ceremonially draw water from, presumably, a holy vessel, and then pour it out on top of an altar- that's the idea behind, “...before the Lord.”

⁷ Judas Maccabaeus gathered his forces at Mizpeh apparently in hopes of repeating Samuel's famous victory over the enemies of the Lord's people according to 1 Maccabees 3:46.

⁸ Compare 1 Samuel 7:7

Secondly, they fasted. By this we understand the text to mean that the people of God entered into a ritual fasting wherein they abstained from food and possibly water for a set period of time — most likely a period of eight hours, but possibly twenty-four.

Food and water are essential for life. By virtue of the poured out water and the foregoing of food, God's people in essence were saying, “Lord we relinquish that which is essential to life for a taste of You! We are Yours!”⁹

We see this symbolized elsewhere in Scripture. For example, think of the time in David's life when three of his captains risked their lives to give him a cup of water.

2 Samuel 23:16-17a, “And the three mighty men brake through the host of the Philistines, and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem, that was by the gate, and took it, and brought it to David: nevertheless he would not drink thereof, but poured it out unto the LORD. And he said, Be it far from me, O LORD, that I should do this: is not this the blood of the men that went in jeopardy of their lives?”

David is saying, “Such devotion belongs only to God. I therefore give it to Him.” The poured-out-water was a sign of dedication and devotion to the Lord.

Or think of the time after God changed Jacob's name to Israel.

Genesis 35:14, “And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he talked with him, even a pillar of stone: and he poured a drink offering thereon, and he poured oil thereon.”

Jacob was so enthused with God that he participated in a ceremony where he symbolically poured himself out before the Lord. It was through this act of pouring water out before the Lord that Jacob committed himself to Christ!

Thus when God's people gather at a place synonymous with devotion to the Lord, and there water is poured out and food is rejected, the implication cannot be missed. Israel now was at God's disposal. Israel, after living for self now willingly was saying, “Take me Lord; I am yours!” Robert Bergen put it this way:

“When Israel 'drew water and poured it out before the Lord' (v. 6)... they... were denying themselves liquids as a symbolic confession that the Lord's favor was more important to them than life-sustaining water.”¹⁰

The Confession

Now this brings us to the confession of Israel.

1 Samuel 7:6, “And they gathered together to Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured it out before

⁹ Fasting can have a spiritual benefit to your soul, if in the process of abstaining from food the hunger pangs (1) reveal your weak and vulnerable condition before God, and (2) drive you to a renewed passion and vigor for Christ whereby you say, “God, as my body is so dependent upon food, so may my soul be dependent upon You.

¹⁰ Robert Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, NAC, page 107.

the LORD, and fasted on that day, **and said there, We have sinned against the LORD.** And Samuel judged the children of Israel in Mizpeh.”

This is not necessarily a declaration that occurred after Israel's revival or even after the poured out water. Rather what is being said is that, “Through the ceremony of devotion — through the poured out water and rejected food — God's people confessed their sin.”¹¹

In light of this, the passage is made clearer if one reads “thereby” instead of “there.”

“And they gathered together to Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured it out before the LORD, and fasted on that day, and said **thereby, We have sinned against the LORD.**”

Now this confession is quite significant when it comes to spiritual renewal! To declare that “you have sinned” is to do at least two things. First it renounces every right or claim that you might have had to anything from God. Secondly it vindicates God from any charge of “unfairness” that might have arisen on account of His dealings with you on account of your sin.¹²

This later statement bears some explanation. Don't ever forget that we are being watched by the world¹³ and by the angelic host.¹⁴ Thus, in the context of church discipline, when God ordains a bitter providence on account of sin, accusations undoubtedly will be raised against God. Moses picked up on this:

Exodus 32:12, “**Wherefore should the Egyptians speak, and say, For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth?** Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people.”

And thus for the sake of God's glory, an inseparable part of spiritual renewal is the vindication of God whereby we say, “God is just; we are the sinners; we have no rights!”

Rights

Now some of you might be tempted to think, “Wait a minute! Isn't it obvious that we don't have any rights before God? So why the formal renunciation of one's rights, we have no rights?”

No rights?

Are you kidding! Before we were saved, I would be inclined to agree that we have little if no rights before God. In fact, the only right that a non-Christian possibly could have before the Lord is the receiving of the wages of their sin — which is death.¹⁵ Thus if the non-Christian gets nothing more from life than death, they haven't been gypped!

But with the Christian all of that has changed. Behold the grace and mercy of the Lord who grants so many rights and privileges through the cross. When we were saved we were given the right of the firstborn.¹⁶ And thus, in Christ we have the right to become children of God,¹⁷ to be protected by God,¹⁸

¹¹ Compare Keil and Delitzsche and their treatment of שָׁמָּה “there” in this verse. “There” would imply “thereby”

¹² Compare Joshua 7:19

¹³ Compare John 13:34

¹⁴ Compare Ephesians 3:10

¹⁵ Compare Romans 6:23

¹⁶ Compare Deuteronomy 21:17 and Hebrews 12:23

to teach God's word,¹⁹ to ascend into the mountain of the Lord and fellowship,²⁰ etc.

I hope you see that as children of God we have many rights. And yet as part of Israel's ceremony of spiritual renewal, God's people proclaimed to the Lord and the world, "We relinquish all these rights to God!"

ARE YOU WILLING TO SAY THIS TO THE LORD?

- We have no right to complain; and we won't.
- We have no right for You to treat us with love; and we won't expect it.
- We have no right to blessing.
- We have no right to covenant protection.
- We simply are glad to bear Your name!

I hope you see that this sentiment is a crucial element of spiritual renewal that must not be omitted! Think of the renewal of the Prodigal Son and his planned confession to his father.

Luke 15:18-19, "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants."

This is the passion and sentiment of everyone who would know spiritual renewal in their life.

- God in virtue of my sin; I have no rights!
- Treat me as a hired man!

From this we see the third element of spiritual renewal: Devotion!

Oh how I exhort you this day to make such a declaration to the Lord!

- Come before Him with full knowledge of your brokenness and spiritual poverty.
- Turn from all your futile attempts at placation.
- Renounce the passing pleasures of sin.
- Bow before the Lord with open hands saying, "My heart I offer Thee, promptly, sincerely, and with no expectations or conditions."

Open Hands before the Lord

In fact, in my study on the postures of prayer as found in Scripture I have noted that one of the prominent postures for adoration is standing with hands raised. Now it is often asked, "What is the significance of hands raised before God?"

While we're not going to be able to answer that definitively from Scripture (for the Bible is mute on the subject), let me tell you what it is NOT. It is not a means to experience God more fully. This would

¹⁷ Compare John 1:12-13

¹⁸ Compare Genesis 12:3

¹⁹ Compare Psalm 50:16

²⁰ Compare Psalm 24:3-4

make it akin to the mystery religions which endeavored to ascend unto God via their experience. Many today in the church are trying to reduplicate this error by endeavoring to experience God in their worship service. With raised hands, they let the music take them over and thereby they think they're worshipping.

Brothers and sisters, Christianity is a religion not of ascent, but of descent. We do not work or worship our way to God. God condescends to our level in and through the cross! Raised hands in prayer are not meant to express dependence — like a child raising his hands to be picked up by a parent. This too is akin to the mystery religions where the worshipper is seeking to be picked up and so embraced by God. Again, Christianity is NOT the sinner being raised up to God, but God coming down to the sinner!

So what do raised hands indicate?

Let me make a suggestion — and it is only a suggestion. In a world of sin whereby the child of God frequently can be found grasping onto this false security and that broken cistern. Or grasping this pleasure or that treasure — a child, a spouse, a job, a way of life. Standing in reverence before the Lord with open hands raised before God proclaims nothing less than these words of Augustus Toplady:

“Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling; naked, come to Thee for dress; helpless, look to Thee for grace, foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die.”²¹

One is declaring to God these things:

- I claim no right or privilege before You!
- I offer myself to You without qualification!
- Use me as a vessel of honor or dishonor!
- Treat me as a hired hand!

This, brothers and sisters, is the third element to spiritual renewal. It is a renunciation of any claim that we might make on life. It is an open and raised hand which again says to God, “My heart I give Thee, promptly, sincerely, with no strings attached!”

Now brothers and sisters, I probably don't need to say this but, “That's scary!”

So let me encourage you! In the parable of the Prodigal Son, after the child made such a declaration before God, what was the father's response?

Was it to say, “Alright? Get ready! I'm going to get you!”? Did the father say, “After all you've done? Get out of here?”

NO! Instead we read these words:

Luke 15:20-24, “And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And

²¹ Augustus Toplady, *Rock of Ages*, New Trinity Hymnal, 499, 500

they began to be merry.”

The father said, “You are no slave; you're my child- —and forevermore you shall be! Enter into the joy of your master!”

Brothers and sisters, trust in the goodness of God- He never will give you a stone. Relinquish your claims. And enter into a deep and abiding relationship with God!

You say — looking at our passage which contains a formal ceremony whereby God's people committed themselves to the Lord — “I wish we could hold a ceremony akin to what I read in this passage today! I'd love to make formal my intention to serve the Lord as did God's people in the days of Samuel.”

Ah but our modern church environment won't allow this. After all, a service of dedication where one confesses his sin to the Lord might be a distraction to a visitor who doesn't want to feel guilty about their sin. Furthermore, that would violate the good order of the church assembly. And therefore the temptation of most when it comes to responding to a message like this — as independent Americans — is this: We'll hold our own dedication ceremony in the privacy of a quiet time, Bible study, or prayer. After all who needs a formal service?

Family of God, we are so blind! What do you think is to occur every week when we gather for worship? It is a divinely sanctioned time of renewal, dedication, submission and devotion. Here we freely give ourselves to Him who died on our behalf! Through (1) confession of sin, (2) assurance of pardon, (3) the time of dedication whereby we have opportunity to give ourselves to the Lord. (4) the preaching of the word and the covenant renewal which accompanies the Lord's Supper.²² God gives us the vehicle to recommit ourselves to Him in a ceremony where He is specially present! Matthew Henry wrote this:

“When we come together in religious assemblies, we must remember that it is as much our business there to join in public prayers as it is to hear a sermon.”²³

In other words, don't think that a service of worship is simply a sermon. It is much more. It is a time for us all to engage in a ceremony of covenant renewal whereby we say, “God take me; I'm yours!”

Let us this day, NOT aspire to private and personal acts of devotion — whereby we create and dictate the situation and the terms of our service — RATHER, let us submit to God's form of Spiritual Renewal housed in the worship of God.

Now, this morning all that is left to this service is the Lord's Supper. So instead of zoning out, watching the clock, longing for the service to be done, let us spend the remainder of the time that God has given us and commit ourselves to the Lord! This is one of the functions that Christ, using the words reminiscent of a covenant renewal ceremony, attributed to the Lord's Supper.

1 Corinthians 11:25, “After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.”

²² When the Lord's Supper is observed.

²³ *Matthew Henry's Commentary in One Volume*, page 291.

Through the giving and receiving of bread and wine we are to confess our wretchedness and our need for Christ. And we are to commit ourselves to the Lord with no conditions or exceptions.

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on March 5, 2006. Greg is the Preacher at Broomfield Presbyterian Church.