

Recap

- We've skipped forward:
 - in chapter 3 Samuel was a young boy
 - here, at his next appearance, at least 20 years have passed, and possibly more
 - in between, the Ark of the Covenant has been captured in battle by the Philistines, caused their cities distress, and finally returned to Israel - but not to its rightful place
 - and Samuel has been continuing to "grow in stature and in favor with the LORD and with men."
- And now Samuel's re-appearance heralds desperately needed new mercies for Israel

Tears of... repentance?

- The Ark of the Covenant was kept in Kiriath-jearim for twenty years (v.2)
 - during that time Israel called out to the Lord for help - "mourned and sought after the Lord"
 - more literally they wailed after the Lord; the picture is of a little child having been told off trailing behind mum wailing! - supermarket!!
- Tears and distress don't always signify repentance:
 - they can be just a masquerade - like crocodile tears
 - here Samuel presses the people to go beyond just an emotional outburst
 - genuine repentance does not stop at tears and wailing, it goes on to action
 - Samuel presses Israel to put away the foreign gods they had adopted
 - true repentance will meet the Lord's demand for exclusive allegiance to him, whatever it takes to obey it
 - so Samuel reasserts the first commandment to Israel
- Jesus says the same thing to the disciples when he says: "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." (Matthew 10:37,38)
 - the same thought was present as John records his vision of Jesus in Revelation (letter to church in Ephesus): "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place." (Revelation 2:4,5)
- Christian life is a life of ongoing and continual repentance for putting others before him.

The First and Greatest Commandment

- What Samuel is calling Israel to is not easy:
 - "You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:3)
 - they are to renounce all male and female deities of the popular fertility worship
 - most fun-loving Canaanites found the combination of liturgy and orgy highly desirable, where sexual rites were part of worship
 - it was no easy task for the people of Israel to peel themselves away from the grip of a cult that was sensual and promised to make the crops grow because of it
- (What is our equivalent?)
- The Philistines got to hear about Israel's repentance and gathering at Mizpah:
 - smelling revolt, not repentance, they come
 - Israel were pathetically afraid - "Keep praying, Samuel," they said
 - pathetic they may have been, but they are different to when they were at Ebenezer before
 - then they wanted to coerce God by bringing his furniture to the battle site (1 Sam 4:1-3)
 - now they sense their own helplessness and can only resort to prayer and cast themselves upon the mercy of God

- Chapter 7 is a parallel to chapter 4, but a parallel that shows off the contrasts
 - previously Israel were struck down, now it is the Philistines
 - previously it was "Let the Ark save," now it is "Let God save"
 - previously the result was 'Ichabod' - the glory departed, but now the cry is 'Ebenezer' - helped
 - previously Israel was dabbling in religious magic, but now they are walking by (a little?) faith
- Their only weapon this time is prayer, their only hope is in the intercession of Samuel whom they recognise as one walking with and favoured by the Lord
 - but desperation is never in trouble when it rests on the omnipotent God
 - he thundered and threw the Philistines into confusion
 - maybe Samuel had learned something of this from his mum - for Hannah knew that's what God does, long years before!
- Sadly we can often be just as blind to our own true state (within the church and as individuals) as Israel was long ago:
 - things putter along, and we drift into depending on ourselves
 - it is only when God takes our props away - our institutions, our membership, ... - that we are forced to lean on his mercy alone
 - and rather than being a pious cop-out, prayer becomes the only rational activity left to us
- God is so concerned that we lean on him that sometimes he has to kick away all other props

Remember this!

- Samuel intends that Israel remembers the day of mercy:
 - so he set up a stone, which he called Ebenezer, saying, 'up to this point the Lord has helped us.'
 - a computer system often has the facility to 'roll back' or to 'restore' whereby if something has gone wrong you can go back to a previous setting
 - whenever things were not going well for Israel they could come back and recall their return to the Lord - and recall all God had been to them
 - Ebenezer reminded Israel, too, that what God had been to them in the past he could be to them again - because that's how he is!
 - in faith and love they were to turn to him at all times
- This is what monuments to the Lord's deeds should do for the faith of all his people
 - sometimes that is all that sustains us
 - you may be tempted to despair, be pressed too close to the limit, almost too tired to care
 - even the light of God's presence seems to have gone out
 - you know what the pit is like
- But you can push faith's replay button and hear again the recording of the Bible's story of the troubles of God's people and how he delivered them
 - or you can go back over your own experience of God's providences and mercies over the years
 - list them on a piece of paper - these Ebenezers on the way
 - talk with one another about how God has delivered in the past!!
 - up to this point God has helped
- This is our confidence for the future, as unknown and unlit as it is
- Repentance... for we break the first & greatest commandment, and need to be dragged back to it - sometimes God having had to kick away our props ... God gives us Ebenezers to help sustain us
- Conclude by spending time telling one another what our "Ebenezers" are and thanking God for them