

1 Samuel 7:2-17 (1984 NIV)
Never Easy, Always Possible

Introduction

An elderly American couple, Peter and Linda Biehl, had lost their 26-year-old daughter Amy when she was attacked by two black youths in Cape Town, South Africa. The two youths were imprisoned, but they were later freed in a political amnesty in 1996 with the Biehl's support.

At first, the Biehls and the youths avoided each other, but in 1999 a meeting was arranged at the request of the two black men. One of them said, "In prison, I thought a lot about the Biehls and how they must have felt about their daughter's death. I wanted to make peace with them, to change my life."

Peter Biehl said, "All good relationships start slowly. We did not want to force ourselves on them. It has taken time to build up trust and mutual respect." The Biehls run an aid foundation in South Africa, and need local staff whom they can trust. After two years, they felt their relationship with their daughter's killers had reached a point where they could work together closely. Both the black men have genuine affection for the Biehls and refer to them as "father" and "mother"—the traditional African way of respecting older people.

But in deciding to forgive their daughter's killers and to give them jobs, the Biehls had to endure much criticism both at home and in South Africa. However, Linda Biehl shared how she and her husband felt by saying, "In making peace ... we were able to get on with our lives and make peace with the men who killed our daughter"

(<https://www.buzzworthy.com/mom-forgives-the-unforgivable>)

Indeed, there are some things in life that are never easy because of our humanness, but with the help of God, they are always possible. Forgiveness is one of them, and another is man's consistent devotion to his God.

This is what we see in our text this morning. Israel's commitment to serve God only was never easy because the people had for many years strayed away to do their own things. But in spite of this long lay-off, the renewal of their commitment to serve God was still possible because of what God did.

The Book of 1 Samuel describes the transition of leadership in Israel—from judges to kings. Three characters are prominent in the book—Samuel, the priest, prophet and last judge; Saul, the first king of Israel; and David, anointed as king but not yet recognised as Saul's successor.

Samuel's story begins late in the turbulent time of the judges when Eli is the judge-priest of Israel. The birth of Samuel and his early call by God are found in chapters 1-3. Because of his responsiveness to God, he was confirmed as a prophet at a time when "the word of the Lord was rare" (1 Sam. 3:1).

The passages before our text today tell how the people of Israel have forgotten God in their everyday lives. They had too many good choices before them, and they made decisions that put away God as their centre of devotion. In the process, they came under the subjection of the Philistines.

Today, we too live in a world with many choices—good choices. And in some of the choices that we have made, we may have forgotten God like Israel in Samuel's time. But the good news today is this—God has not forgotten us, just as He had not forgotten Israel in Samuel's time. What then is an appropriate response on our part? It is to remember the goodness of God, and renew our gratitude to Him.

But we have a problem here—devotion to God is never easy because of our human tendencies. However, never easy does not mean that it is not possible. In fact, it is always possible. Why?

I. Because though we may be slow to respond, God is always ready to receive us (vv. 2-9).

Verse 2 tells us that "it was a long time, twenty years in all, that the ark remained at Kiriath Jearim". Behind these words is the sad state of Israel at that time. She was under subjection to the Philistines and her national life and strength was crushed to the ground. Even more sad was the poor state of her worship of God during that time. The ark was in Kiriath Jearim, but how did it get there? We have to go back to Chapter 4 for an understanding.

In Chapter 4, the Israelites fought the Philistines. They suffered a heavy defeat, losing 4,000 men on the battlefield (4:2). And as if in a desperate attempt to turn the tide, the Israelites said, "Why did the LORD bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the LORD's covenant from Shiloh, so that it may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies."

Understand that the ark of the covenant was built by the people when God through Moses instructed them to do so (Ex. 25). This sacred piece was to be placed in the Most Holy Place in the Tabernacle, and it symbolised the very presence of God among His people. And at this juncture of Israel's defeat by the Philistines in 1 Samuel 4, the people decided to bring out the ark as their "trump card", so to speak. As far as the desperate Israelites were concerned, to have the ark going before them was like having God Himself going ahead of them. And if God was in front of them, they supposed that not only would God protect them, but also destroy their enemies before them.

But unfortunately, even with the ark going before them, they suffered a heavier defeat. This time, 30,000 Israelites lost their lives (4:10). Not only that, the Philistines captured the ark, and the priestly family of Eli (the father) and his two sons (Hophni and Phinehas) died. You may say that with this defeat, the whole worship life of Israel was severely crushed as well—the ark (symbol of God’s presence among them) was gone; the whole priestly family was gone.

Yes, Israel came under the subjection of the Philistines. But even more sad was that Israel’s worship life was severely diminished. What do you see when the Israelites decided to push the ark to the front as they prepared to fight the Philistines? I don’t know about you, but it is to me like someone who is trying to walk through a dark alley alone. He is afraid of what the dangers may be ahead. So, in desperation, he placed his Bible in front of him and said loudly, “Have no fear. The God of the Bible goes before me. Now, let all evil be gone in the name of God!”

Friends, this was what the Israelites were doing when they decided to push the ark to the front, thinking that they would have better luck against the Philistines. And that’s no devotion to God, but that’s superstition about God. More tragic than the heavy defeats by the Philistines was the fact that Israel had sunk to the level of religious superstition. They had turned the ark which symbolised the presence of God among them into an idol which they tried to manipulate.

Of course, the Philistines, being who they were, fared no better. Chapter 5 tells us that after capturing the ark from Israel, they placed it side by side with their own deity (Dagon). It is like some people who think that the more sacred statues they put side by side together, the more divinely protected and blessed they will be. This is perhaps what we are seeing here of the Philistines.

But God was not to be mocked. He struck fear in the hearts of the Philistines. God caused the statue of Dagon to fall and break into a few pieces (5:4). Not only that, God sent an outbreak of tumours among the Philistines from city to city so much so that they decided to send the ark back to Israel. The ark was no extra protection, but bad luck!

So in Chapter 6, we see them sending back the ark on a cart after loading many golden treasures on it (6:3-5). They thought, “We have offended a deity. If we are to get rid of the bad luck that has befallen us, then we have to offer some treasures to appease this angry God.” Does that sound familiar? Of course, we see many expressions of this kind of belief today. Want to chase away bad luck? Just offer/burn some “goodies” to the deities.

Religious superstition mistaken as religious devotion. The Philistines were guilty of it. So were the Israelites. In fact, we are told in 6:19-20 that God struck dead some of the Israelites because they tried to look into the ark. You see, no one was allowed to look into the ark as this would tantamount to a total irreverence for God’s holy presence. Those who were trying to look into the returned ark probably wanted to see if they could find more golden treasures in

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it. This was irreverence in God's sight, and He struck them dead. What disaster! Who would want to keep it? No wonder the Israelites asked in 6:20, "Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God? To whom will the ark go up from here?" We read in 7:1 that the Israelites finally decided to place the ark under the care of an almost unknown family in Kiriath Jearim—Abinadab and his household. No one wanted the ark. God was angry with them, and the best thing to do was to keep a long distance from Him.

It is with this as the background that we can grasp the impact of the words in 7:2—"It was a long time, twenty years in all, that the ark remained at Kiriath Jearim." It was 20 long years of Philistine subjection. More importantly, it was 20 long years of religious superstition, not devotion—nobody in Israel felt excited about the ark of the covenant (symbol of the very presence of God). They didn't want it not because God was not true or powerful, but because this God was angry with them; He would bring them disasters rather than blessings. But instead of getting right with this God whom they believed to be true and powerful, the Israelites decided to find favour with other gods. That's why we read of the Baals and Ashtoreths in v. 4. These two were the male and female principal gods of the Canaanites. And Israel favoured these deities because they feared the true God Yahweh ... and they did so for 20 long years. What a sad commentary on Israel's worship life.

Indeed, the line between spiritual devotion and spiritual superstition is often very thin. On one hand, we can view God as so good that we manipulate Him to do what we want. The Israelites tried to turn the ark into an instrument of magic by bringing it ahead of them when they fought the Philistines in Chapter 4. On the other hand, we can also view God as so angry that we isolate Him far away lest bad things befall upon us. The Israelites were so fearful of God that they put the ark far away from them, isolated in the house of the almost unknown family of Abinadab.

Let's guard our devotion to God from turning into superstition about Him.

I know of a couple whose child once went through some adjustment problem. She became very emotionally upset and expressed it with long, crying spells. The parents were confused, anxious, and even scared about what's happening to her. Many well-meaning relatives offered all kinds of reasons and suggestions.

One of them suggested that perhaps the parents had unknowingly offended a certain spirit. And knowing that they were a Christian family, the relative said, "Maybe you should hang up a cross somewhere in the house to protect your family."

The grandmother in the family was perhaps the most badly affected. So, she said almost in a demanding tone to the father, "I want you to hang up a cross on the wall. We need special help from Jesus."

In order to pacify her so that there would not be another emotionally disturbed person in the house, that's what the man did though he did not believe that a hung-up cross had any magical power.

Devotion or superstition? Pray that we will have the Lord's wisdom to know the difference.

But this was the “blind spot” of the Israelites in 7:2—for 20 long years, they feared that the presence of God among them would bring them disaster, and they turned to dabble with other deities. Their religion was some kind of mixed beliefs and that's the kind of mix to conjure up all kinds of superstition. But the good news we read in 7:2 is that in spite of this, “Israel mourned and sought after the LORD”.

What does that imply? Well, it implies that Israel all these 20 years had not really stopped believing in God. Rather, they were afraid of God, thinking that He was all out to bring trouble upon them. It also implies that while almost all in Israel had not been single-mindedly devoted to God, at least one man had been. Not only was he faithful to God all this while, he was also working hard quietly at calling Israel to come back to God rather than run away from Him. This man was none other than Samuel himself. Through his ministry among them all these 20 long years, Samuel slowly but surely rekindled the people's devotion to God.

And when the time was ripe, Samuel stood up and said in v. 3, “If you are returning to the LORD with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.”

The people's response to Samuel's uncompromising words was equally uncompromising—they “put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only” (7:4). And Samuel as judge over Israel saw the time right to convene a national assembly at this place called Mizpah (7:5). And when they had gathered up there, they “drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and they confessed, ‘We have sinned against the LORD’” (7:6). Indeed, Israel observed a special national day—they publicly and openly pledged devotion to God and confessed their sin before Him.

In 2 Sam. 14:14, we read that “like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered, so we must die. But God does not take away life; instead, he devises ways so that a banished person may not remain estranged from him”. Hence, the pouring out of water onto the ground by the Israelites here on this special national day could have signified that they knew how helpless they were without God. In fact, they knew they would certainly perish if God would not receive them back and do something to help them. The fasting on their part further signified their desire to seek intimacy with God in their repentance. What all this boils down to is this—after 20 long years, Israel made a sincere and genuine effort to turn their hearts back to God.

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They pledged to serve God only; they put away their foreign gods (who were also worshipped by the Philistines); they gathered at Mizpah to confess their sin. As far as the Philistines were concerned, this was not a mere act of returning to God, but an act of rebellion against their rule. Little wonder they immediately set out to attack Israel.

And what did the Israelites do? They did not go to Abinadab's house to bring out the ark and put it ahead of them, like they did so superstitiously in Chapter 4. They did not ask Samuel to lead them in battle, knowing that he was no battle-hardened, five-star general. Rather, they said to Samuel. "Do not stop crying out to the LORD our God for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines" (7:8). You see, they had learned to appeal to God on the basis of grace, not magic or human power. And 7:9 tells us that Samuel "cried out to the LORD on Israel's behalf, and the LORD answered him". You see something great happening here? After 20 long years, God still listened to Israel!

That doesn't mean we take our time lest we be guilty of mocking and testing the forbearance of God. BUT IT DOES MEAN THAT GOD IS NOT SADDENED BY A SLOW RETURN TO HIM IF IT IS A SINCERE ONE. DEVOTION TO GOD IS NEVER EASY, BUT IT IS ALWAYS POSSIBLE BECAUSE THOUGH WE MAY BE SLOW TO RESPOND, GOD IS ALWAYS READY TO RECEIVE US.

Devotion to God is never easy, but it is always possible. Why?

II. Because it is in our most difficult situation that God loves us most (vv. 10-17).

Verse 10 tells us as the Philistines drew near to attack the Israelites, God "thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites". Well, how did God thunder? Did He say in a thundering voice, "You evil Philistines, come and face your disastrous end", or did He cause the heavens to flash a great, blinding light that fell all the Philistines immediately onto the ground? Well, we are not told how. But what we can be sure is that God answered the cry of help from the Israelites through the prayer of the faithful Samuel. In their most difficult situation, a repentant nation cried for help; a faithful man prayed; and the faithful God answered. An extremely vulnerable Israel called out to God through the prayer of a faithful man against the awesome might of an oppressive military power. And God, in His faithfulness, answered them. It was in Israel's most difficult hour that God loved them most.

However, unlike previous times, it is not superstition that drove Israel to cry out to God this time. The people had learned over those 20 long years that they should not manipulate God, trying to control Him so as to satisfy their fleshly desires. They had learned the hard way that though the ark symbolized the presence of God, He would not allowed Himself to be confined in a wooden box. Indeed, the Israelites had learned that they could not put God in a box. His

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promises were not meant to be magical formulations in that when they did this and that, God would somehow be controlled by them and He would have to do this and that for them in return.

This “miraculous” victory over the Philistines does not support belief in the magical power of any human, but the majestic Person of God Himself. It does not mean that if we are repentant, God will have to do what we want Him to do. It does not mean that if we get someone “spiritual” to pray for us, God will have to do what we want Him to do. This victory over the Philistines is “miraculous” and not “magical” because it is God’s victory, not Israel’s or Samuel’s. It is not magical because it is not the result of man successfully manipulating God to do what he wants. Rather, it is miraculous because God in His own will decides to do what He wants in response to the cry of the weak and helpless. It speaks of the majestic Person of God because when people are in their most difficult trial, God shows that He loves them most in His own chosen way.

The story was told of William Cowper. He was a Christian poet and had sunk to the depths of despair at one time. One foggy night, he called for a horse-drawn carriage and asked to be taken to the London Bridge on the Thames River. His intention was not to go there to seek some peace by enjoying the night scene. Rather, he was so overcome by depression that he intended to commit suicide. But after two hours of driving through the mist, Cowper’s coachman reluctantly confessed that he was lost.

Disgusted by the delay, Cowper left the carriage and decided to find the London Bridge on foot. After walking only a short distance, he discovered that he was at his own doorstep! The carriage had been going round in circles. Immediately he recognised the restraining hand of God in it all.

Convicted by the Holy Spirit, he realized that the way out of his troubles was to look to God, not to jump into the river. As he cast his burden on God, his heart was comforted. With gratitude he sat down and penned these words:

God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.
O fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds you so much
dread are big with mercy; and shall break in blessings on your
head.

Indeed, when man comes to his wits’ end in his most difficult hour, God begins in his life by loving him most. God may choose to remove that burden; God may choose to remove that spirit of depression in the face of that same burden; or God may choose to bring in others to help share that burden. Whatever God may choose, He is telling us that He loves us most even in our most difficult time—not with human magic, but with His own divine love.

(Zuck, Roy B. 1997. *The Speaker's Quote Book*. GR: Kregel)

In Israel's case, when the people were in their most vulnerable moment, God chose to rescue them from the Philistines by way of a "miraculous" victory. And you know, what's of first concern to God was not how the victory came about, but how the people responded to that victory. You see, the human tendency is to come crying before God when there's a big problem, but after it has passed, to go away without any remembrance of God's goodness. And that's manipulation, not devotion.

We see then how faithful Samuel demonstrated what devotion meant. After that great victory, Samuel demonstrated that devotion was not manipulating God's goodness, but memorializing His goodness. 1 Sam. 7:12 says, "Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, 'Thus far has the LORD helped us.'"

Ebenezer means "stone of help". And what makes this stone special is that it was a visual reminder of God's goodness to the Israelites; that they were helped and loved by God at a time when they were most hated by the Philistines. And such a visual remembrance would in turn lead to an unadulterated worship of God. Verse 17 ends our passage today with this uncompromising affirmation—Samuel "built an altar there to the LORD"; not to Baal and Ashtoreth; not to Baal, Ashtoreth and the LORD; but to the LORD only. The LORD had been good to them—He delivered them from Philistine oppression; He restored their lost territories; He even enabled Israel to free her neighbour from the Philistines; He brought peace between Israel and the Amorites (7:13b-14). Israel remembered the LORD's goodness and they worshipped Him only.

I have no pictures of my boyhood days with me anymore. You know why? Because I am one who has the tendency to throw away old and outdated things.

My wife knows me well enough. So she when our daughters were still very young, she had warned me not to throw away the pictures of our girls in their infant years. Why? She was planning a photo collection for each of them which would include their baby/childhood pictures, and she would give it to them on their 21st birthday as a reminder that they were God's gifts for us.

So these photos were not to be thrown away no matter how yellowed they had become. My wife had intended these to be memorials of God's loving kindness to us, especially after she had gone through the pain of two miscarriages.

You may choose different ways of memorializing God's goodness to you. Whatever they may be, the important thing is that they help you to memorialize God's goodness in your life. And we all need that if we are

to remember God as the Person of our devotion, not as an object of our manipulation.

GOD IS NOT SADDENED BY A SLOW RETURN TO HIM IF IT IS A SINCERE ONE. ALSO, IT IS NOT THAT GOD IS UNABLE TO HELP US IN OUR MOST DIFFICULT SITUATION, BUT HE IS GRIEVED WHEN WE THINK HE LOVES US LESS IN THAT SITUATION.

YES, DEVOTION TO GOD IS NEVER EASY, BUT IT IS ALWAYS POSSIBLE BECAUSE THOUGH WE MAY BE SLOW TO RESPOND, GOD IS ALWAYS READY TO RECEIVE US. AND THOUGH WE MAY BE IN OUR MOST DIFFICULT SITUATION, GOD IS STILL LOVING US.

Conclusion

How then does all this boil down to some specifics in practical terms? Let me suggest three ways as some kind of spiritual renewal:

- One, renew the connectedness between our worship of God and our way of life. We see how the spiritual life of the Israelites can be such a contradiction—on one hand, they mourn and seek after God, yet on the other, they worship Baal and Ashtoreth. What about us? Are we living one way on Sunday in church, and another during the rest of the week? What must you and I do or put away in order to renew the connectedness between our worship of God and our way of life?
- Two, renew the commitment to come back to God without delay. For 20 long years, Israel was out of fellowship with God. They practised an empty type of religion—only in the name of the faith, but without the substance of faith. How long has God been a distance from us? Pray that we will make a commitment to stay close to Him.
- Three, renew our joy in the Lord by remembering His past goodness. Samuel set up a stone to remember the goodness of God. We have short memories or we have too many things to think of that we often erase away the things past. Satan cannot stop God from being good to us, but he can rob away the joy of God's goodness for us by making us forgetful. Pray that God will help us memorialize His goodness so that we can worship Him for what He has done, for what He is doing, and for what He will do.

Pray the Lord will so help us. Amen!