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INTRO: My dad once told me about this church he knew where one of the deacons embezzled a lot of money and disappeared.

He was gone for years, nobody knew where he was.

And then out of the blue one Sunday he showed up at church.

It turned out he had a drug addiction, and those years he disappeared he was going down, down, down, until he hit bottom.

But the Lord lifted him out the pit and he came to back church that morning because he wanted to confess that he had stolen the money and ask if they would please forgive him.

The next Wednesday night the church had a covered dish supper—and they gave this man a new suit, and a new pair of shoes, and they put a gold ring on his finger.

That sounds familiar, doesn't it? Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son.

The younger son demands his inheritance, half his father's estate, and he goes off and squanders it on wild living and then he falls into destitution.

He's reduced to feeding pigs for a living and is so hungry he wants to eat the pig food. Then Jesus says he came to his senses.

Decides to go back to his father and say:

Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired men.

His father sees him coming, and runs to him and hugs him and kisses him—and the son says: I've sinned against heaven and you—

But his father immediately orders his servants to put a robe on him, and sandals on his feet and a ring on his finger and he orders that the fattened calf be killed, and a celebration be held for his son who was lost and who has now returned.

Jesus' parable doesn't mean every time someone repents you have to literally give him new clothes and shoes and a ring and have a party to celebrate.

But that's what this sweet little church did.

This man who disgraced his office, betrayed their trust, gave their tithes and offerings to drug dealers, and who disappeared for years—he repented—and they forgave.

In the fellowship hall that Wednesday night they shook his hand, they embraced

him, they ate with him, they gave him those tokens of love and restoration.

The people of Israel had been messing around with pagan worship and pagan living for a long time. They worshipped the Baals and Ashtoreths, gods of Canaan.

Even after the Lord returned the ark, the people of God did not return to him.

They were still so irreverent toward the ark that the Lord killed 70 men.

They basically abandoned the ark. Let it stay in Kirath Jea-rim for 20 years.

For those 20 years they kept relying on the Canaanite gods instead of the Lord.

Those were hard years.

Remember, the Israelite army had been decimated—30,000 men killed—

after their disastrous attempt to use the ark as a lucky charm to manipulate God.

They had no viable military power. They were firmly under the Philistine's thumb.

The Philistines controlled all the trade routes in the region.

Which meant the Israelites were being economically bled to death.

Life was getting harder and harder for them.

Even so, they kept worshipping the Baals and Ashtoreths.

They seemed to prefer to be miserable with these idols than return to God.

But then, by the grace of God, they began to repent.

It says they started to mourn and seek after the Lord.

Samuel reappears in the story. It's not that he was gone, just not listening to him.

But now they want to listen to the prophet. He tells them to repent and they do.

He offers a burnt offering on their behalf, a lamb is sacrificed.

After all those years of preferring their sins to God,

God sweeps away their sins as if they had never been committed.

And he then gives them a victory over the Philistines so decisive

that it altered the political situation for years to come.

The Lord gave them a wonderful new beginning when they repented.

That's what this chapter is about. It's about the amazing grace of repentance which the Lord bestowed on Israel after they spent decades away from him.

If you want a new beginning.

If you want God to treat you as if you had never sinned against him.

If you want him to draw near to help you or to deliver you from an enemy—
then you must do what Israel did.

You must simply repent. That's all. Repentance is all the Lord requires.

Let's look at this story and see what it can teach us about repentance.

We'll break it down under three headings—
the heart of repentance, the blessing of repentance, and the life of repentance.

MP#1 The heart of repentance

The heart of repentance is repentance from the heart.

True repentance that God accepts is fundamentally a change of your heart.
The people of Israel were mourning and seeking the Lord.

And Samuel asks them if they are returning to the Lord with all their hearts.

The Bible often refers to the heart.

When we talk about the heart, we usually mean feelings or emotions.

Sometimes we contrast the head and the heart, what you know vs. what you feel.
But that's not exactly what the Bible means when it talks about the heart.

It's not just referring to your feelings or emotions.

The heart means your innermost person. Your true self.

Your heart is what you think. It's what you really think and really want.

It's more than just emotions, it's your affections. Your desires.

Repentance is a change of heart.

Its is turning of your true inner self—your thinking, your wanting—
away from your sin and away from your idols and turning toward the living
and true God.

That means you start to deal with him.

You seek his forgiveness for sinning against him.

You start looking for his help rather than help from your idols.

It's amazing how often the Bible repeats this—that true repentance is a change
of heart. There are numerous examples but look at one on front of the bulletin.

Joel 2:13 Rend your heart and not your garments.

What does that mean?

A sign of sorrow in Bible times was rending your garments.

If someone died, you tore your clothes.

Or if you had done some terrible wrong, tearing your clothes was an expression
of how sorry you were for the wrong you had committed against someone.

There is nothing wrong with outward expressions of repentance.

They are good and necessary. People expect them and God expects them.

There is an outward expression of repentance in this story.

The people gathered for worship, drew water and poured it out before Lord.
Scholars aren't sure what that signified.

It might have been a day of fasting without even drinking water.
It might have been an expression of desire to be cleansed and forgiven.
We have a corporate, outward expression of repentance every Sunday.
Call it the confession of sin. Read a prayer or a psalm aloud.
Churches don't have to do it that particular way, but the Bible makes it clear
that God does expect and require that his people confess and repent in worship.
And my point is that it will take some kind of outward form.

Joel's point is not that outward expressions of repentance aren't good.
It's that the Lord is saying: Don't forget. I can see what human beings can't see.
I can see inside you. I can see your heart. I want to see your heart torn.
I want to see grief and hatred of your sin and a heartfelt return to me.
Outward expressions of your repentance are wonderful—
I accept them and expect them.
But don't you dare think you can fool me by just going through those motions
if your heart has not turned toward me.

What does a repentant heart actually look like?

Samuel tells the Israelites in verse 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.

That's what they did. Next verse:

So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths and served the LORD only.

Let me read you a paragraph from Dale Ralph Davis' commentary.

Samuel was calling Israel to a difficult repentance. Canaanite religion exerted a powerful
appeal with sexual rites that were part of its worship. Most fun-loving Canaanites doubtless
found the combination of liturgy and orgy highly congenial, not to speak of the convenience of
having chapel and brothel at one location. It was no easy task to peel the Israelites out of the
grip of a cult that asked for and approved the offering [of illicit sex] if they wanted their crops
to grow. No superficial—only a supernatural—repentance would break such bondage. And
only steadfast hearts would keep them in the way of repentance.

I read that because when you think about the Israelites having these idol statues and
bowing down to them, you think, that wouldn't be hard to repent of.

Just throw them away. But it wasn't easy. The roots were sunk in deep.

A toxic combination of pleasure and security and religion illicit desires and habits
formed over decades.

Like that embezzling deacon. His drug addiction wasn't an easy idol to turn from

It took a supernatural repentance to turn from it and to the Lord.

Like all of our pet sins and idol—the have their claws in us.

So repentance from the heart is obviously a gift of God's grace. We have to repent. We have to respond—but the Lord first has mercy and liberates our enslaved hearts. That brings us to . . .

MP#2 The blessing of repentance

The greatest blessing of repentance is not just forgiveness—it's a restored relationship with God.

The way the writer of 1 Samuel depicts Israel's restored relationship with the Lord is masterful. What he does is draw our attention back to chapter 4 and then invite us to compare and contrast chapter 4 with chapter 7.

So, let's compare and contrast chapters 4 and 7.

In chapter 4, the Israelites and the Philistines faced off in battle.

In chapter 7 the same thing is about to happen again for the first time in 20 years. At Samuel's instructions the Israelites assembled at Mizpah for a worship service.

The Philistines heard and they sent their forces to stop the assembly.

Back in chapter 4, when the Israelites faced the Philistines they were confident.

Confident because they brought ark of the covenant to battle field.

It was their lucky charm. God in a box. They even said, Let it save us. It.

When they saw the ark they cheered so loudly the earth shook.

The Israelites were absolutely certain they were going to win.

What about this chapter?

When the Israelites heard the Philistines were coming to attack they were afraid.

But they didn't go running off to get the ark or some other lucky charm.

Instead they said to Samuel.

Don't stop praying to the Lord for us that he may save us.

Notice the contrast. Not it, he. They were dealing with the Lord again.

And they acknowledged that he may save us and he may not—it's up to him.

Which shows they came to realize that they couldn't manipulate God, couldn't bargain with God—instead they had to cry out for mercy and trust him.

And even more specifically, it's Samuel's prayers for them and the burnt offering that he offered on their behalf that is the basis of their trust in God.

This is important because both of those things are foreshadowings of Jesus Christ.

Samuel the intercessor, Samuel standing between God and repentant people.

That's a picture of Jesus Christ. He is our mediator with God.

When we repent, we know he prays for us and represents us.

And then there is the burnt offering of this sacrificial lamb.

The Old Testament sacrifices were God's way of providing substitution.

The animal was killed in place of the repentant worshipper.

The lamb pointed to the ultimate substitute Jesus Christ—the perfect lamb. So there is this huge relational contrast between chapters 4 and 7.

They go from attempting to manipulate God to asking his forgiveness, and trusting his mercy to them through their intercessor and substitute. They are dealing with the Lord personally again.

They were enjoying meaningful contact again after 20 years of sad idolatry.

Then what happened? Another contrast.

Back in chapter 4 the Israelites were struck down by the Philistines, 30,000—which resulted in decades of subjugation.

Here in chapter 7 the very same Hebrew verb is used but it's the Philistines who are struck down instead.

The Lord thunders against them, throws them into a panic, and the Israelites rush out and drive the Philistines out and slaughter them. Then, over the coming years, under Samuel's leadership they liberate the towns and villages under Philistine control. Repentance has long-term results.

That's how the Lord still works. When you repent, he not only forgives you.

He begins to soften and sometimes even erase the fallout from your sin.

I couldn't print all of Joel 2 on the front of the bulletin.

But in verse 25 the Lord says something wonderful.

Tells Israel, "I will restore to you the years the locusts have eaten."

They had suffered a literal locust plague that destroyed their crops.

God says: Repent, rend your hearts, return to me—and I'll restore those lost years

I had a friend who came to realize that she had some destructive attitudes and ways of relating to people that were estranging her from her children.

As she began to realize how deeply engrained this was in her thinking and personality and how damaging it was, she began to mourn and seek the Lord.

Idols of our thought life are very hard to overthrow.

And part of her worry was—It's too late.

God might forgive me, but this has gone on so long, there's no undoing it.

This was the verse he gave her, Joel 2:25—

I will restore to you the years the locusts have eaten.

And he did. He enabled her to reconnect with her children.

You can claim that promise for yourself: I will restore to you the years locust eaten.

Rend your heart, not your garments. Return to the Lord. Watch him work.

The Lord decides what this will look like.

And in this life, there are sometimes things that don't go back together like were, but that's ok, because the greatest blessing of repentance is restored relationship. That relationship must be constantly nurtured. Brings to last point.

MP#3 The life of repentance

There is one more significant contrast between chapter 4 and chapter 7.

At the end of chapter 4, after the Israelite army was slaughtered, and the ark captured, and the priests of Israel all dead—Hophni and Phineas killed by the Philistines, and Eli falling over in shock and breaking his neck—

The last sad event of that day was that when Phineas' wife, Eli's daughter-in-law heard the news, she went into premature labor and died after giving birth.

Right before she died she named her son Ichabod—the glory has departed.

That's how the chapter ends.

It's as if God has left Israel because of her sins. Ichabod.

At the end of chapter 7 there's another strange name. Ebenezer.

Samuel took a large stone and set it up, and named the stone Ebenezer, which means stone of help.

He told the Israelites, Thus far has the Lord helped us.

What did that mean?

When you first read that, it seems like he was simply commemorating the victory over the Philistines. God helped us beat them to this spot.

But Samuel was making a much more profound statement.

He was saying, Everything you have experienced to this point—the good, the bad, and the ugly are all part of God's help and God's hand.

It's not just this victory over the Philistines.

God was helping you back when he let the Philistines beat you, and let the ark be taken into captivity, and when he let you have your idols for those 20 years and suffer the miserable consequences.

That was all God helping you then too—because it was his way of ultimately leading you to repentance and a restored relationship with him.

Several years ago I read the autobiography of Michael English.

I don't know much about Christian Contemporary Music,

but he was a big name in that world back in the 90s. Very talented. Awards.

He describes how his stardom became a substitute for God in his life—

and then he crashed morally and his life fell to pieces. He lost everything.

I won't go into those details, but let me read how he describes his repentance.

This is actually from an interview he did, not the book itself.

One night I ended up on the couch of somebody's house because I was homeless. I'd let my hair go, I didn't shower; I just didn't care. I told everybody around me I'd be dead before I was 40. So I ended up on a couch and I took (all the drugs) I had and I fell off to sleep. Next thing I know I'm hearing something in my mind and I'm seeing something, and what I'm seeing is myself and it was God showing me what I'd become. 'Is this what you want? Is this where you want to go? Is this the road that you want to go down? Is this how you want your daughter remembering you?' . . . I didn't know what to say. I just said off the top of my head, 'I don't know what you expect! I don't know what you want! I don't have anything else to offer you! I can't sing anymore! ' I'd lost my voice but even if I hadn't no one would let me sing in church again. But he let me know that it wasn't about that. It wasn't about Christian music. It wasn't about how good you sing. It was about how much God loved me, and how much he wanted me to come home. And that's when I realized there's still a place at the table for me. And God was just saying, 'You can come home, and it doesn't matter what you've done. I didn't have to go shave. I didn't have to go clean up. I only had to come home.

And after that was the hard part! And you know what? It was good for me. I had to go through hell, even more hell, to understand the refining process of everything. And it's a great place to be. You know, I ended up homeless basically. I didn't have anything. And today I have a wife, a home, and I have a better perspective of God. He's a God of love, mercy and grace . . .

Michael English's Ebenezer was that couch.

That was not only where he repented, but where he began to realize that God had been in his life all along, and even the destruction and sin God was using and redeeming for his purposes.

And even though he doesn't say it explicitly here, he became a repentant man.

Repentance became a part of his life as a Christian in a way never was before.

What is repentance? What is it really? It's a dimension of our faith in Jesus Christ.

It's the form our faith in Christ takes in regard to our sins.

No wonder Jesus himself as he began his ministry reduced his message to this:

Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent, truly, genuinely as Israel repented, and the deacon, and Mr. English.

This is what God desires from us, a plea for his forgiveness.