

# Homiletics Analysis: 1 Samuel 7

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## Content & Intent

### **This Text — Content:**

First Samuel 7 records the decisive national turning point between Israel's defeat and spiritual paralysis under Philistine domination and a moment of genuine covenant renewal, culminating in military deliverance and lasting peace. The chapter opens with the ark at Kiriath-jearim, where it has sat for twenty years while Israel mourns and laments (vv. 1–2). Samuel steps forward as covenant mediator, calling the nation to return to the LORD with wholehearted repentance — putting away the Baals and Ashtaroth and directing their hearts to Yahweh alone (vv. 3–4). The people assemble at Mizpah, where they fast, confess, pour out water before the LORD, and acknowledge Samuel's authority as judge (vv. 5–6). The Philistines, hearing of the assembly, advance for battle — producing terror in Israel. The people cry out to Samuel to intercede, and Samuel offers a whole burnt offering while crying out to the LORD on Israel's behalf (vv. 7–9). The LORD answers with a thunderous intervention, throwing the Philistines into confusion, and Israel routs them as far as Beth-car (vv. 10–11). Samuel erects the stone Ebenezer — “Thus far the LORD has helped us” — as a permanent memorial to the divine deliverance (v. 12). The chapter closes with a summary of the Philistine subjugation throughout Samuel's lifetime, the restoration of captured cities, peace with the Amorites, and Samuel's circuit ministry as judge over Israel (vv. 13–17).

### **This Text — Intent:**

God is calling His people to understand that national and personal renewal is not generated by religious activity, military strength, or institutional recovery — it flows from whole-hearted return to the LORD alone. The chapter sets before its readers the pattern: repentance precedes deliverance; intercession is the hinge on which history turns; and every victory must be memorialized as God's work, not Israel's. The intent is not merely to record a historical deliverance but to produce in the reader a posture of repentance, a confidence in covenant intercession, and a habit of attributing every “thus far” to the LORD's help rather than their own resources.

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**Subject Sentence:** Whole-hearted return to the LORD alone brings covenant renewal and secured deliverance.

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**Primary Claim:** God is demonstrating through Israel's renewal at Mizpah that He responds to whole-hearted repentance and faithful intercession with covenant faithfulness — and

that every deliverance must be received as His work, credited to Him, and memorialized accordingly. The passage calls the reader not merely to observe this pattern in Israel's history but to inhabit it: to put away competing loyalties, cry out for intercession, and mark every "thus far" as evidence of the LORD's sustaining hand.

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## Interpretive Evaluation

**The nature of repentance in vv. 3–4:** A significant interpretive question concerns what Samuel's call to "return to the LORD with all your heart" requires. Wesleyan/Arminian readings often emphasize the completeness and sincerity of the human response as the condition that activates God's covenant fidelity — the people's act of putting away idols being, in effect, the meritorious precondition for divine help. This reading should be *qualified*. The text does present Israel's repentance as genuine and is not embarrassed by the sequence (return → deliverance). However, the broader narrative of 1 Samuel makes clear that Israel's return itself is a response to the LORD's prior movement — the twenty years of mourning (v. 2) that the narrator frames as divinely shaped longing. The Deuteronomic theology underlying this narrative presents repentance as covenant response, not human initiative that obliges God. The Reformed reading rightly insists that the repentance itself is a gift of God's awakening — Israel "lamented after the LORD" (v. 2) before Samuel's call, suggesting the Spirit was already at work.

**The water-pouring ceremony (v. 6):** The unique ritual of pouring out water before the LORD at Mizpah has generated interpretive debate. Some traditions, particularly those emphasizing sacramental continuity, have read this as a pre-figuration of baptismal renewal. This reading should be *refuted* as load-bearing for exposition. The text does not explain the rite in sacramental terms; the most defensible reading within its own context is that it was a public act of self-abasement and humiliation before the LORD — possibly symbolizing the outpouring of the self in repentance, or the acknowledgment of Israel's helplessness before a holy God. Calvin and most Reformed commentators take it as a confession of unworthiness. The exposition should treat it as an act of covenant humility, not import sacramental freight the text does not carry.

**Samuel's intercession and its function (vv. 8–9):** Dispensational readings sometimes treat Samuel's intercessory role as unique to the theocratic administration of Israel and therefore non-transferable to the church age. This should be *acknowledged* at the level of the specific national-theocratic context but *qualified* as an over-restriction. The New Testament explicitly presents Christ as the ultimate intercessor of which Samuel is a type (Hebrews 7:25), and the church's prayer life is repeatedly grounded in the same pattern: the community in crisis, crying out to God through a mediator, receiving divine action in answer to that cry. The Reformed reading rightly identifies Samuel as a type of Christ the great Intercessor while also affirming that the pattern of intercessory prayer in community remains fully applicable to the church.

**The Ebenezer memorial (v. 12):** Some evangelical popular preaching treats the Ebenezer stone primarily as a prompt for personal nostalgia — “count your blessings, name them one by one.” This is a *homiletical* pitfall (addressed below) rather than an interpretive divergence. The Reformed reading insists that the Ebenezer is covenantal — it is not a sentimental memory aid but a public, embodied declaration of the LORD’s covenant faithfulness, grounding future confidence in documented past faithfulness. The stone faces forward as much as backward: “thus far” implies “and therefore also from here forward.”

**The Reformed reading** preferred throughout: This chapter is best read as a Deuteronomic covenant renewal narrative in which the LORD demonstrates His faithfulness to His people when they return to Him through repentance and intercession. Samuel functions as covenant mediator and intercessory type pointing forward to Christ. The deliverance is entirely God’s initiative in response to His own covenant promises — activated by repentance He Himself has worked in His people — and the Ebenezer memorial grounds Israel’s ongoing confidence in the LORD’s documented faithfulness rather than in their own performance.

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## Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 30:1–10** — The foundational covenant pattern: when Israel returns to the LORD with all their heart and soul, He will restore their fortunes and respond with covenant blessing. First Samuel 7 is this pattern enacted in narrative; Deuteronomy 30 is its theological blueprint.
- **Jeremiah 29:12–13** — “You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.” Corroborates the pattern of whole-hearted return preceding divine response; grounds the pattern in God’s own covenant promise rather than in a mechanical principle.
- **Hebrews 7:23–25** — Christ as the permanent, perfect intercessor who “always lives to make intercession” for His people. Samuel’s intercessory role in vv. 8–9 finds its ultimate fulfillment and type in Christ; what Samuel does temporarily and incompletely, Christ does permanently and perfectly.
- **Romans 8:26–27** — The Spirit intercedes for the saints according to God’s will. The pattern of intercession as the hinge of deliverance (1 Samuel 7:9) finds its New Covenant form in the Spirit’s ongoing intercessory work — grounding the Christian’s confidence that their cries are always being perfectly mediated.
- **Psalms 124** — “Our help is in the name of the LORD” — a psalmic Ebenezer; the whole psalm is an elaborated memorial of the LORD’s saving intervention for His people, grounding ongoing confidence in documented covenant faithfulness. Direct canonical parallel to the Ebenezer stone’s function.

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**Aim:** To lead the reader to whole-hearted repentance of competing loyalties, confident prayer through the great Intercessor, and the habit of naming every deliverance as the LORD's work — so that accumulated Ebenezers become the foundation of their future faith.

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## Content Table

| Verse(s) | Content                                                                                                                      | Notes                                                                                                                              |
|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1        | The ark rests at Kiriath-jearim in Abinadab's house; Eleazar consecrated to keep it                                          | Twenty-year pause begins; ark present but not central to national life                                                             |
| 2        | Twenty years pass; all Israel mourns and laments after the LORD                                                              | The mourning itself is divinely shaped — a precondition for the coming renewal; "lamented after the LORD" signals covenant longing |
| 3        | Samuel calls Israel to return with all their hearts: put away Baals and Ashtaroth, direct hearts to the LORD, serve Him only | The double condition: put away idols AND direct heart to Yahweh — both required; this is whole-hearted covenant return             |
| 4        | Israel puts away Baals and Ashtaroth and serves the LORD only                                                                | The people respond in obedience — a genuine, concrete act of covenant fidelity                                                     |
| 5–6a     | Samuel calls assembly at Mizpah; Israel gathers, draws and pours out water before the LORD, fasts                            | Public, corporate, embodied repentance; the water-pouring as self-abasement/humiliation                                            |
| 6b       | Israel confesses: "We have sinned against the LORD"                                                                          | Explicit verbal confession; covenant acknowledgment of guilt                                                                       |
| 6c       | Samuel judges Israel at Mizpah                                                                                               | Samuel's judicial-mediatorial role established at this moment of national renewal                                                  |
| 7        | Philistines hear of the                                                                                                      | The test arrives immediately                                                                                                       |

| Verse(s) | Content                                                                                                                                                           | Notes                                                                                                                                 |
|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|          | Mizpah assembly and advance; Israel fears greatly                                                                                                                 | after the assembly — the renewed community faces the same threat that had previously defeated them                                    |
| 8        | Israel cries out to Samuel to intercede with the LORD their God for deliverance                                                                                   | The people recognize they cannot fight this themselves; they call for intercessory mediation                                          |
| 9a       | Samuel takes a nursing lamb and offers it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD                                                                                   | The intercessory sacrifice: the lamb fully consumed — total self-offering in intercession                                             |
| 9b       | Samuel cries out to the LORD on Israel's behalf; the LORD answers him                                                                                             | The hinge of the chapter: divine response to covenant intercession                                                                    |
| 10       | The LORD thunders against the Philistines in confusion; Israel strikes them down to Beth-car                                                                      | The LORD fights for Israel; Israel participates but the victory is clearly His — the thunder is His initiative                        |
| 11       | Israel pursues the Philistines from Mizpah to below Beth-car                                                                                                      | Israel acts in the wake of the LORD's intervention — not the cause but the instrument of the rout                                     |
| 12       | Samuel erects the Ebenezer stone: "Thus far the LORD has helped us"                                                                                               | The memorial: naming the victory as the LORD's; grounding future confidence in documented covenant faithfulness                       |
| 13       | Philistines subjugated; they do not come again into Israel's territory throughout Samuel's lifetime; the LORD's hand against the Philistines all of Samuel's days | The lasting fruit of covenant renewal; the victory is comprehensively the LORD's — "the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines" |
| 14       | Captured cities restored to Israel; peace between Israel and Amorites                                                                                             | Covenant restoration is comprehensive — territorial, political, relational                                                            |
| 15–17    | Samuel judges Israel as circuit judge throughout his                                                                                                              | Samuel's ongoing covenant ministry; the pattern of                                                                                    |

| Verse(s) | Content                                 | Notes                                                    |
|----------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
|          | life: Bethel, Gilgal, Mizpah, and Ramah | renewal extends through his lifetime of faithful service |

## Divisions Table

| Division | Verses | Label                                                          |
|----------|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1        | 1–2    | The Long Silence: Twenty Years of Mourning and Longing         |
| 2        | 3–4    | The Call to Return: Putting Away Idols and Directing the Heart |
| 3        | 5–6    | The Assembly at Mizpah: Corporate Repentance Embodied          |
| 4        | 7–9    | The Crisis and the Cry: Intercession as the Hinge              |
| 5        | 10–12  | The Deliverance and the Memorial: God Fights, Samuel Marks It  |
| 6        | 13–17  | The Fruit of Renewal: Lasting Peace and Faithful Ministry      |

## Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

**Subject Sentence:** Whole-hearted return to the LORD alone brings covenant renewal and secured deliverance.

**Primary Claim:** God is demonstrating through Israel’s renewal at Mizpah that He responds to whole-hearted repentance and faithful intercession with covenant faithfulness — and that every deliverance must be received as His work, credited to Him, and memorialized accordingly. The passage calls the reader not merely to observe this pattern in Israel’s history but to inhabit it: to put away competing loyalties, cry out for intercession, and mark every “thus far” as evidence of the LORD’s sustaining hand.

## Applications (Five)

**1. Identify and put away the specific Baals competing for the allegiance of your heart.**  
(*Affections/Worship*)

Samuel did not call Israel to “worship God more” in the abstract — he called them to name and remove the Baals and Ashtaroth that had taken up residence alongside Yahweh. The application is not a general invitation to spiritual renewal but a specific demand for idol inventory. For the contemporary reader, the Baals are whatever has been given god-like authority over security, identity, or hope — financial security, vocational success, relational approval, control over outcomes. Whole-hearted return to the LORD begins with the concrete act of naming what occupies the throne beside Him and removing it. You cannot direct your heart to Yahweh alone while maintaining a secondary altar.

## **2. Understand that your access to the great Intercessor is the reason you can face your Philistines without paralysis. (*Mind/Belief*)**

Israel’s response to the Philistine advance was not courage or strategy — it was the cry, “Do not stop crying out to the LORD our God for us” (v. 8). They knew that the decisive factor in the coming battle was not their own military capacity but whether intercession was being made. The believer’s position before the Philistines of life — chronic sin, relentless opposition, circumstances that outstrip their resources — is identical: the decisive variable is not their strength but their Intercessor’s faithfulness. Hebrews 7:25 says Christ “always lives to make intercession” for His people. This is not a peripheral comfort — it is the structural reason why Christian confidence is possible. You are not facing your battles attended by a mediator who might intercede; you are attended by one who always does.

## **3. Practice corporate, embodied repentance rather than private, theoretical acknowledgment of sin. (*Will/Behavior*)**

The Mizpah assembly is strikingly physical and communal — the people gather together, fast together, pour out water before the LORD together, and confess together. The text is not interested in private spiritual disposition alone; it presents covenant renewal as something that takes a body, takes a community, and takes visible form. The application is concrete: the contemporary believer should not reduce repentance to an inward acknowledgment while maintaining behavioral and relational patterns unchanged. Repentance takes shape in the body — in what you stop attending, what you start doing, who you bring your confession before, what you fast from, what you visibly reorder. If the repentance has no embodied expression in community, it is not yet the repentance this passage has in view.

## **4. Stop attributing your deliverances to your own resilience, strategy, or spiritual effort — and start building Ebenezers. (*Affections/Worship*)**

Samuel erects the stone not as a monument to Israel’s courage or Samuel’s intercessory skill but as a public, named declaration: “Thus far the LORD has helped us.” The instinct of the human heart is to absorb delivered moments into a narrative of personal competence — “I got through that difficult season,” “we found our way through that financial crisis,” “I overcame that.” The Ebenezer discipline runs counter to that instinct: it demands that each deliverance be named as the LORD’s work, credited to Him publicly, and

memorialized in a form that will bear witness to future faith. The application is practical: keep a record of your Ebenezers. When fear arises, go to the record. “Thus far” is always evidence that the God who helped you here will help you forward.

**5. Submit to and support the faithful covenant ministry of those set apart to judge and intercede on your behalf. (*Will/Behavior*)**

Samuel’s circuit ministry in vv. 15–17 — Bethel, Gilgal, Mizpah, Ramah — is not an administrative footnote. It is the sustained, institutional fruit of the Mizpah renewal. The people who called out “Do not stop crying out to the LORD for us” did not merely receive a one-time intercessory act; they submitted to a lifetime of covenant ministry through Samuel’s ongoing judicial and intercessory work. The application for the contemporary reader is the posture of submission to and support for the faithful ministry of pastors, elders, and teachers who carry out a Samuel-like function in the community. This is not passive attendance but active trust in and cooperation with those who teach, judge, and intercede on behalf of the covenant community.

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## Theological Importance

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First Samuel 7 teaches that the LORD is sovereignly faithful to His covenant people when they return to Him in whole-hearted repentance — not because their repentance obligates Him, but because covenant return activates the promise He has already made. The passage presents God as the active combatant — it is His thunder that confuses the Philistines, His hand that is against them throughout Samuel’s lifetime — making clear that Israel’s deliverance is not a human achievement that God ratifies but a divine act that Israel participates in. The chapter also teaches that God is not indifferent to competing loyalties: the call to “put away the Baals and Ashtaroth” and the immediate military test that follows the assembly are sequentially linked, suggesting that the LORD will not share the allegiance of His people with false gods and that genuine renewal demands the removal of rival claims. Finally, the Ebenezer memorial establishes that God’s covenant faithfulness is meant to be documented, named, and made into a foundation for future trust — the LORD’s past faithfulness is not merely historical data but living evidence of His ongoing character.

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## Reformed Theological Significance

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This passage is a textbook instance of the Reformation’s insistence that human initiative and divine sovereignty are not in competition but are ordered: God awakens the longing (v. 2), works the repentance He then responds to, and accomplishes the deliverance that the



people then inhabit. The Reformed doctrine of effectual calling finds its Old Testament narrative form here — the twenty years of mourning are not random but divinely shaped preparation, and the repentance that follows is genuine human response to divinely initiated awakening. Samuel’s intercessory role is also theologically significant from a Reformed standpoint: it anticipates the one Mediator of the New Covenant (1 Timothy 2:5) and establishes that access to God’s covenant faithfulness runs through a mediator rather than directly through the people’s own moral performance. The Ebenezer stone encodes a covenantal epistemology — the people are to know God’s future faithfulness by documented evidence of His past faithfulness, not by introspection or feeling, which grounds assurance in the objective record of God’s acts rather than the subjective assessment of one’s own spiritual condition. This is the Reformed doctrine of assurance located in its narrative, covenantal home.

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## Main Takeaway

The LORD is calling you to do what Israel did at Mizpah: name the Baals, remove them, and bring your whole heart back to Him — and then watch what He does when genuine return meets His unbreakable covenant faithfulness. You are not fighting without an Intercessor, and you are not moving into the future without evidence: stack your Ebenezers, read them often, and refuse the lie that you got yourself “thus far” on your own.

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## Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the chapter to a biographical sketch of Samuel’s leadership.** Samuel is a central figure, but the chapter is not fundamentally about Samuel’s qualities as a leader, judge, or intercessor. The temptation in preaching narrative is to let the human figure become the subject — “be a Samuel in your generation.” This violates the Clowney/anti-moralism principle. Samuel functions as covenant mediator and intercessory type pointing to Christ; the primary subject is the LORD’s covenant faithfulness, not Samuel’s admirable qualities. Applications should be grounded in what God does through Samuel, not in imitating Samuel’s personal virtue.
- **Treating the Ebenezer stone as sentimental nostalgia rather than covenantal epistemology.** The popular use of v. 12 in evangelical culture tends toward “count your blessings” territory — a warm, retrospective exercise in personal gratitude. This misses the covenantal weight of the Ebenezer. The stone is a public declaration of the LORD’s covenant faithfulness, erected not for individual comfort but as communal testimony grounding future confidence in objective evidence of past faithfulness. Preach it with its forward-facing edge: “thus far” is a claim about who God will be, not just who He has been.

- **Presenting repentance as a spiritual technique that produces deliverance by mechanism.** If the sermon presents the Mizpah sequence (repentance → assembly → intercession → deliverance) as a formula the congregation can deploy whenever they need God to act, it has turned covenant response into spiritual technology. The Reformed concern here is real: repentance is the appropriate human response to God's covenant call, not a lever that compels divine action. The deliverance at Mizpah flows from God's covenant faithfulness and sovereign grace, activated by His own prior work of awakening in the people. Present the pattern as covenant reality, not as a spiritual algorithm.
- **Skipping the idol-inventory demand in vv. 3–4 and moving directly to the encouraging deliverance.** The call to “put away the Baals and Ashtaroth” is not a preliminary condition quickly dispensed with — it is the heart of what whole-hearted return requires, and it is precisely where the sermon will encounter the most resistance. Contemporary congregations have contemporary Baals that compete for the heart's allegiance with just as much force as the Canaanite fertility cults. The preacher who moves quickly past the idol-inventory to arrive at the comforting Ebenezer stone has not preached this text — he has preached only the back half of it.
- **Treating vv. 13–17 as administrative summary to be skipped.** The closing summary of the Philistines' subjugation throughout Samuel's lifetime and his circuit ministry is not a bureaucratic appendix. It is the theological payoff: the fruit of covenant renewal is lasting peace and ongoing faithful ministry. The comprehensive restoration — territorial, political, relational, judicial — is the picture of what shalom looks like when a community truly returns to the LORD. Skipping this section leaves the sermon without its landing strip, truncating the full picture of what the Mizpah renewal produced.
- **Failing to identify Samuel as a type of Christ the Intercessor.** The intercessory sacrifice in v. 9 — a whole burnt offering, Samuel crying out to the LORD on behalf of a people facing imminent destruction, the LORD answering in decisive intervention — is one of the clearest Old Testament types of Christ's intercessory work. Preaching this text in a New Covenant congregation without tracing the Samuel-to-Christ typology leaves the congregation with a moving historical account but no gospel anchor. The point is not to force a christological application onto every verse but to name clearly that what Samuel does imperfectly and temporarily, Christ does perfectly and permanently — and that the confidence Israel draws from Samuel's intercession is the same confidence the believer draws from the one who “always lives to make intercession.”