

Brawl Along The Watchtower

1 Samuel 7:2-17 July 5, 2026

Charles Jenkins was an army deserter. In 1965 he was stationed along the DMZ between North and South Korea. He was afraid of being killed by patrolling guards or, worse, being sent to combat in Vietnam. So, one night, he got drunk and walked through the mine-infested no man's land.¹

He assumed he'd be able to go to the Soviet embassy, be granted asylum, and then shortly be sent back home in a prisoner swap. But after *one day* he realized he'd made the worst mistake of his life. For *40 years* he endured imprisonment, torture, near starvation, and absolute hopelessness.

North Korean doctors removed two of his organs. Once, when his US Army tattoo was spotted, his captors cut it off him with a knife and scissors. We was regularly beaten.

Finally, in 2004, Charles was allowed to leave. After arriving in Japan, he marched into a US Army base, saluted the lieutenant colonel there and said, "Sir, I'm Sergeant Jenkins, and I'm reporting."

Charles was the longest missing defector to return to duty in army history.² But returning home wasn't without cost. The charges against him - deserting his post and aiding the enemy - were *capital* offenses. The statute of limitations was 40 years. Charles had been gone 39 and a half.³ But he returned. He admitted his guilt. And though there was a price to pay, he was shown mercy.

In 1 Samuel 7, we see a nation of *spiritual* defectors. After more than 20 years, they realize they want to return to a relationship with the living God. It's going to cost them something. And, when they come back, everything in life doesn't magically get better. In fact, at first things get very scary. But where chapter 4 was one of the lowest points of their history, chapter 7 becomes one of the pinnacles of faith, of reconciliation, of piety and promise and providence. And here we see what it means to return to the Lord, not just with our *emotions*, but with the motion of our lives.

1 Samuel 7:2 - ² Time went by until twenty years had passed since the ark had been taken to Kiriath-jearim. Then the whole house of Israel longed for the LORD.

God's people weren't just in political trouble, they were in terrible spiritual trouble. Every indication is that not only was Shiloh destroyed, but that they had no tabernacle for these 20 years.

What does that mean? No corporate worship. No annual sacrifices. No central gathering of the people to hear from the Lord. It was a total breakdown of their national relationship with God.

¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/charles-robert-jenkins-dead-us-soldier-defector-north-korea-life-story-communism-propaganda-films-court-martial-a8106171.html>

² <https://tjaglcs.army.mil/Periodicals/The-Army-Lawyer/tal-2021-issue-1/Post/5729/Lore-of-the-Corps-Stranger-than-Fiction>

³ <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/vietnam-war/charles-robert-jenkins.html>

That doesn't mean *no one* was faithful. There were people like Samuel, like Hannah and Elkanah, like Ruth and Boaz. But *nationally* speaking, they are in desperate need of renewal and revival.

Finally, a 20 year disruption, the people start to *long* for the Lord. The phrase means they wept repentantly.⁴ That they *turned* after Yahweh.⁵ It reminds us that God can *always* be found. He *wants* to have a real, communicative, directive, growing relationship with you. And because of that, He promises, "You will find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you."⁶

After all these years of doing what's right in their own eyes, of not listening to God, how could they return? They had treasonously defected from their God yet again. Would He accept them?

1 Samuel 7:3-4 - ³ Samuel told them, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, get rid of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths that are among you, set your hearts on the LORD, and worship only him. Then he will rescue you from the Philistines." ⁴ So the Israelites removed the Baals and the Ashtoreths and only worshiped the LORD.

Before we see what *the people* needed to do, first notice what *God* had already done. When they finally turned their hearts to Him, we *immediately* see Samuel. Samuel has been gone for three chapters - off the page for more than 20 years. But God had providentially put Samuel in place and had faithfully raised him up so that the *moment* they were ready to repent, God had a man there to show them the way back home. It's an *amazing* demonstration of God's *long* work of grace.

Now, what Samuel said was it is one thing to *feel*, it's another to *follow*. There are plenty of times when we *feel* a certain way toward God - we feel conviction, we feel badly about sin, or we feel inspired to devote ourselves more fully to His work - but do we *follow* in discipleship?

Jesus ran into people who had big feelings. Then He'd say, "Follow Me." But many weren't willing to go from feeling to following. But remember, we're not only called to belief, but *discipleship*.

Samuel says, "Returning to the Lord must include *renouncing* these sinful things you've been doing." We learn, tragically, that the house of Israel had been worshipping the Baals and his female counterparts the Ashtoreths.⁷ It was time to stop trying to serve more than one Master.

When Samuel says, "Get rid of" these gods, it means to set something down and not pick it up again.⁸ They needed to *purge* their lives of sin. To recognize idolatry for what it was and turn away.

But then it wasn't just purging, but also pursuing. "Set your hearts on the Lord." Samuel references their hearts twice. It wasn't *only* about following rules, but devoting their lives.

⁴ Ralph Klein *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 10: 1 Samuel*

⁵ P. Kyle McCarter *1 Samuel: A New Translation With Introduction And Commentary*

⁶ Jeremiah 29:13-14

⁷ James Smith *The Books Of History*

⁸ Bill Arnold *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel*

In the end it was *love* that got Charles Jenkins out of captivity. After many years, his keepers forced him to marry a Japanese woman they kidnapped. They ended up falling in love for real. Because North Korea needed to improve relations with Japan, in 2002 they let her go. She then worked for a pardon for her husband. Charles said their love gave him the strength to survive.

Great spiritual revival doesn't start from the outside in. It *must* start in the heart. *That's* what God wants. Yes, He wants your hands, your tongue, your plans, your life, but if you don't want to give Him your heart, He's not satisfied with the rest. Does your heart *long* for the Lord?

This is *always* the decision we're presented with: Love God, pursue Him, or don't. It's what Jacob said to his family. It's what Joshua said to the tribes of Israel. And when asked what the most important command is, Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." And if we think *we're* immune from idolatry because we don't bow before carvings of Baal, we're fooling ourselves. What is in your heart toward Jesus?

Here's the good news: *Anyone* could do what Samuel told them to do. Meaning *everyone* could be brought into a thriving relationship with the living God of grace and power. And if we will love Him, *then* the worship will flow and the right relationship will develop.

1 Samuel 7:5-6 - ⁵ Samuel said, "Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD on your behalf." ⁶ When they gathered at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out in the LORD's presence. They fasted that day, and there they confessed, "We have sinned against the LORD." And Samuel judged the Israelites at Mizpah.

Mizpah. Our author wants us to pay attention to this place. He uses the name seven times between verse 5 and 15. When the Bible repeats itself, there's something to discover.

The exact location of Mizpah is disputed between a couple of sites, but it was somewhere in the land of Benjamin, in the geographic middle of the Promised Land.⁹ Which means that far away tribes had equal travel. And roads entered Benjamin from the north, south, east, and west.

The Hebrew name means "Watchtower,"¹⁰ or "the Outlook."¹¹ Both possible locations were elevated, giving a great view all around. More importantly, Mizpah had been the place where Israel gathered to plan their *revenge* against the Benjaminites.¹² Now God gathers them in *repentance*. And from that place they are reminded that *God* is their fortress, *God* is their Commander, *God* is their strong tower. That *God* has given them a life to lead, not according to what is right in their own eyes, with their own designs and headings, but a life lived according to *His* plans for them.

And there, they have this sweet worship service, where they proclaim that God's faithful love is better than life. They pray and fast and confess. They don't only *feel* badly, they *own* their guilt.

⁹ John Beck *The Narrative-Geographical Shaping of 1 Samuel 7:5-13*

¹⁰ Beck

¹¹ Klein

¹² Beck

Charles Jenkins understood that it would cost him something, but he plead guilty at his court martial. He wanted to clear his conscience, even after all those decades.¹³

We have to *confess* our guilt to the Lord. At first, Charles' defense attorney sought a discharge in lieu of trial. But that would not do. In a similar way, God has *dealt* with your sin. He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, but we must confess. Not just ignore, not just rationalize, but confess "We have sinned against the Lord." And then God does His work of forgiving and healing and restoring.

1 Samuel 7:7-8 - ⁷ When the Philistines heard that the Israelites had gathered at Mizpah, their rulers marched up toward Israel. When the Israelites heard about it, they were afraid because of the Philistines. ⁸ The Israelites said to Samuel, "Don't stop crying out to the LORD our God for us, so that he will save us from the Philistines."

All these people gathering and then performing a religious ritual probably looked a lot like a military action to the Philistines, so they decide to preemptively attack.¹⁴

Right when the people return to the Lord what happens? The enemy tries to destroy them. "Wait, Lord, I don't want this kind of opposition or trouble!" But remember, when the sower sows the seed on the soil of our hearts, Satan tries to come like a bird and devour it to keep us from growing. *Of course* we will face trials when we step toward God in devotion and obedience!

Let's notice two things here. First, the Israelites *believed*, but they were *afraid*. Most of us know the Bible has *many* commands to not fear. We're given that reminder over and over *because we tend to be afraid!* How is the Lord going to provide? How is He going to solve this problem? How is He going to come through? Following Jesus can be scary. And it's not just us, it was the apostles, too. It's ok when we find ourselves afraid. What God doesn't want is for us to *stay* afraid. We can choose to trust Him. We can choose to acknowledge His faithfulness. Yes, they were afraid. But notice this second aspect: *When* they were afraid, they trusted in the Lord's power and His promise.

In verse 3, He promised to deliver them. Now is the moment. The Philistines are here. God's people said, "Keep praying. Keep worshiping! God, *save us!*" And you know what I love about what they said? They said, "Don't stop crying out to the Lord *our* God." So often in the Bible you see people say, "The Lord *your* God." But here, the Israelites are *in*, even as the enemy marches up the road.

1 Samuel 7:9-11 - ⁹ Then Samuel took a young lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. He cried out to the LORD on behalf of Israel, and the LORD answered him. ¹⁰ Samuel was offering the burnt offering as the Philistines approached to fight against Israel. The LORD thundered loudly against the Philistines that day and threw them into such confusion that they were defeated by Israel. ¹¹ Then the men of Israel charged out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines striking them down all the way to a place below Beth-car.

¹³ *Independent*

¹⁴ Beck

Here come the Philistines. What do the Israelites do? They worship. No other preparations! In their moment of crisis, the people say, "What we need is our Lord to *answer*." And that's *exactly* what He does. He answers with thunder and power and protection.

And here we have yet *another* fulfillment of Hannah's prophetic song. "Those who oppose the LORD will be shattered; He will thunder in the heavens against them."¹⁵

Meanwhile, we've seen how the Philistines were worried about *not* being like Egypt, yet they *did* harden their hearts against God's revelation. So they suffer the same fate as Pharaoh's army.¹⁶

1 Samuel 7:12-14 - ¹² **Afterward, Samuel took a stone and set it upright between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, explaining, "The LORD has helped us to this point."** ¹³ **So the Philistines were subdued and did not invade Israel's territory again. The LORD's hand was against the Philistines all of Samuel's life.** ¹⁴ **The cities from Ekron to Gath, which they had taken from Israel, were restored; Israel even rescued their surrounding territories from Philistine control. There was also peace between Israel and the Amorites.**

If you've ever sang *Come Thou Fount Of Every Blessing* and wondered what in the world that line "Here I raise my Ebenezer" meant, *this* is what it's referencing.

The stone is set up along this ridge road so that any traveler would see it, be reminded, and reflect on God's *active* goodness and faithfulness toward His people.¹⁷ It may have even been inscribed with an account of this glorious deliverance.¹⁸

And *why* did it happen? *Not* because they trotted the Ark out. *Not* because they had the most elite military. Because they repented and walked with God. Because they were living personal revival.

And did you notice how it throws in that line about the Amorites at the end? The Philistines were enemies from *outside* Israel's borders. The Amorites lived *inside* the borders. Which means, God gave them peace externally and internally.¹⁹ But, more than that, this line about the Amorites shows us God did *more* than they asked for! God went above and beyond.

Who is your help? We've seen a helpful rock in Israel's history before this story. In the wilderness, they were supplied water by the rock. That rock was *Christ*.²⁰ And our Rock *is* Christ. We're supposed to drink from Him. He is our help. He is our victory. Our Champion. Our King.

¹⁵ 1 Samuel 2:10

¹⁶ Exodus 14:24-25

¹⁷ Beck

¹⁸ Arnold

¹⁹ David Toshio Tsumura *The New International Commentary On The Old Testament: The First Book of Samuel*

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 10:4

1 Samuel 7:15-17 - ¹⁵ **Samuel judged Israel throughout his life.** ¹⁶ **Every year he would go on a circuit to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah and would judge Israel at all these locations.** ¹⁷ **Then he would return to Ramah because his home was there, he judged Israel there, and he built an altar to the LORD there.**

Notice: Samuel is not a priest. He's a judge and a prophet and the leader of Israel. Why isn't he serving before the Lord in Shiloh? Because there *is* no Shiloh, no Tabernacle, so he does this annual circuit, bringing God's people the word and leading them.

I think there's a sweet note here: He's back in Ramah. Who else lives in Ramah? His mom and dad. We're not told directly, but we have no reason to believe they're dead. It seems the son they gave to the Lord was restored to them. By one estimate, Samuel might be 33 years old in this passage.²¹

God does such great things for His people. He has so much love, *such* good intentions for us. We could inscribe in stone so many faithful things He has done on our behalf. Do we also have a testimony of how we have followed Him? Have we stayed at our post as disciples? Or have we defected toward some other kingdom, some other allegiance, some other pursuit?

You know, this passage starts with the words, "Time went by." It's sort of innocuous, until we consider the terrible ramifications of lives lived *decades* without the Lord. It's like saying of Charles Jenkins, "time went by." The loss he endured. The life he *could* have lived.

In the end, thanks to love and humility and willingness to confess, Charles made it out. There were three other defectors he was forced to live in a tiny room with. He was the *only* to make it home alive. He lived out the rest of his years with his wife and daughters on a small, Japanese island.

When he came and confessed what he had done, there was a price to pay. He was taken into custody, and yes, he was court-martialed. But the Army gave him a uniform, gave him an advocate to defend him, and gave him an advance payment for soldiers in need of financial assistance. Whereas the people he defected to spent decades savagely harming him.

Are you in relationship with God? Is He speaking to you? Directing you? Are you obeying Him? Growing in Him? If not, it's not because *He* left us. Did you see what Samuel said? "If *you* are returning to the Lord." It was *them* who left, not God. He is always ready to be in relationship with us. *He* is what your life needs. But it's not just about feeling a certain way. It's about following. It's about devoting your life to a God Who has devoted Himself to you. A God Who will do more than we can ask or imagine. Because He's *that* good and *that* gracious. But He works in the lives of those who abide in Him. When we don't abide in Christ, our life withers. Step toward the Lord today. Open your heart to Him. Cultivate the love you have for the God Who loves you. And see what great things He will do in and through your life as you follow His leading.

²¹ Smith