

## **MESSAGE - Part 7 - When God's Love is Still Near - 12.21.25**

Earlier this week I recorded another BIC Life Podcast episode that'll come out in January. This one looks at questions that would be good for us to ask ourselves in the new year. One of the questions was this...

**[SLIDE 1] Where did I notice God's nearness this past year? And where did I resist it?**

We've talked a lot about God's nearness ever since we started our series in 1 Samuel. That first question is a great spiritual discipline to exercise because the more we look back on how God worked in our lives, the more we'll be able to recognize His faithfulness in the present.

But that second question... that's a really honest and raw question. And this is exactly the kind of question today's passage invites us to sit with.

In fact, I'll just tell you now... as I prepared this message, one of the most impactful things for me was Israel's resistance to God's nearness. I say this because — we're not just reading ancient history. These are the real life situations that have shaped God's people for centuries, and continue to shape us today.

Israel's resistance to God's nearness could just as easily be our story. There are times in our lives when our hearts hesitate to seek the Lord. There could be any number of reasons for this... but what I hope we see today is that even when our hearts hesitate, God's love is still near... waiting for us to draw close to Him.

And so, in order for us to grasp the weight of Israel's hesitation, we first need to understand their situation. Like...

**[SLIDE 2] What led Israel to where they are now in 1 Samuel 7?**

Last week we talked about Israel going out to meet the Philistine army in battle. That didn't go well... in fact, it went horribly. Israel's army was devastated. Their priests died. The Philistines took the Ark of the LORD. And it wasn't long before Israel's place of worship was left in ruins.

Then the scene shifts to the Ark being placed in the Philistine temple of Dagon.

If you remember, Dagon's statue couldn't remain standing in the presence of the Ark. That was problem #1 for the Philistines. But there was a second problem...

Yahweh God brought judgment in the form of disease on the Philistines. It got so bad that they decided to send the Ark back to the Israelites, along with a "guilt offering." They were hoping that if Yahweh was causing their sickness, He would stop once they returned what belonged to Him.

Eventually, the Ark was brought to a Judean town called Kiriath Jearim...

And this is where we arrive in 1 Samuel 7. The Ark is back, but Israel isn't celebrating. **Something's not quite right.**

**Listen again to how the chapter begins...**

**[SLIDE 3] 1 Samuel 7:1-2a - So the men of Kiriath Jearim came and took up the ark of the LORD. They brought it to Abinadab's house on the hill and consecrated Eleazar his son to guard the ark of the LORD. The ark remained at Kiriath Jearim a long time—twenty years in all.**

Doesn't something feel off? I mean...

- Why take the Ark to some guy's house and not a place of worship?
- And why put the effort into guarding the Ark, but zero effort into restoring worship around it?
- And why does the text emphasize 20 years?

Something feels off because after everything that's happened, God has proven that He can't be controlled or contained. No one can stand when the LORD's hand is heavy on them—not the Egyptians, not the Philistines... no one.

So it feels like having the Ark back ought to cause celebration in the streets! But instead, nothing changed for Israel. They simply put the Ark in storage and went back to life as they knew it.

And for the next twenty years, something was happening in Israel's heart.  
**Look at the next part of verse 2...**

**[SLIDE 4] 1 Samuel 7:2b – Then all the people of Israel turned back to [lamented/mourned] the LORD.**

Now, that wording is very straightforward in the NIV. But the Hebrew phrase underneath “turned back to” literally describes Israel *lamenting* or *mourning* before the LORD.

In other words, the NIV emphasizes where Israel’s heart was ultimately headed, while the original wording highlights the long, painful process it took to get there. So...

**[SLIDE 5] What we’re seeing here is not a single moment of repentance, but a long season of awakening.**

**The twenty years represent their slow journey from sorrow over what they lost, to sorrow over their own sin.**

At this point, even though Israel had the Ark back, they were still grieving. Remember: They just lost thousands of soldiers; their priests were dead; their place of worship was ruined; and they faced the very real possibility of losing their land.

So, their grief was real. Their longing was real.  
But their hearts weren’t yet ready to fully trust in the LORD.

However, over time — as the LORD continued to work through Samuel — Israel began to recognize that their deepest problem wasn’t their circumstances. Their deepest problem was their divided hearts. They weren’t yet ready to let go of their trust in little-g gods.

And so, to be clear, Israel *did* long for the LORD for 20 years.  
There was grief. There was sorrow. But there was also hesitation.

**[SLIDE 6] Their hearts were reluctant to give up the ways of the world and simply be the Kingdom of God they were called to be.**

So, when the Ark returned, Israel didn’t fully return with it.  
They hesitated. For twenty long, painful years.

**But why?**

That’s what I wrestled with this week.  
Why did they resist God for 20 years?

What was so compelling that rather than set the Ark of God in a place of honor, they put it in storage?

Well, the next couple verses give us some insight. After two decades of spiritual hesitation, Israel was *finally* ready to surrender their idols and return to the LORD with undivided hearts.

**[SLIDE 7] 1 Samuel 7:3-4 - So Samuel said to all the Israelites, “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.” So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only.**

So, Samuel’s like, “If you’re actually ready to return to the LORD...”  
That IF is telling.

It signals the fact that what they say doesn’t carry much weight when their words don’t line up with their actions. **IF** they really were returning to the LORD, then they needed to let go of the other gods they depended on.

God’s Word was always clear. He said, “You shall have no other gods before me ... You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God” (Exodus 20:3, 5).

If they were to truly trust in the LORD, then they needed to take this command seriously. So Samuel calls them to get rid of their foreign gods. It’s time they brought the Ark out of storage and put away the idols of Baal and Ashtoreth.

**But what was so compelling about Baal and Ashtoreth?**

**[SLIDE 8] (image of Baal & Ashtoreth on the mantle)**

First, these are just a couple of the many gods other nations worshiped. Israel adopted these two specifically.

**Baal was thought to have power over the rain.** Which meant if you had his favor, you’d have a good crop harvest season.

**Ashtoreth was thought to have power over fertility and life.**

Both of them were compelling because they addressed real, immediate and physical needs. They promised control over the land and descendants. And unlike Yahweh God, **they didn't demand exclusive loyalty.**

So Israel may have gone through the motions with worshipping Yahweh. But they hedged their bets with Baal and kept Ashtoreth as a “just in case.” Israel feared Yahweh's holiness, but they trusted in Baal and Ashtoreth for their livelihood.

**[SLIDE 9] Their main sin wasn't superstition or even atheism. It was their misdirected allegiance.**

And like we've talked about before, **this wasn't a new thing.** They'd been worshipping other gods for years.

At this point Baal and Ashtoreth were integrated into their society. They would've had small handmade Baal and Ashtoreth idols in their homes and larger versions in the places they worshiped.

And so Samuel cuts straight to the point: *“If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the LORD and serve him only.”*

**And after 20 years of hesitation, they finally listened to Samuel...**

**[SLIDE 10] 1 Samuel 7:4 - So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only.**

This was huge.

Imagine every city still standing in Israel removing their idols from their homes and places of worship. This wasn't just a renovation of the heart. This was a complete remodel.

Israel had been worshipping other gods alongside Yahweh for centuries — This was an “on again, off again” problem for centuries.

In fact, the last time they served the LORD exclusively was a distant memory for the elderly.<sup>1</sup> So again, this was a huge moment for Israel.

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<sup>1</sup> The last time Israel “relapsed” into sin and then remained in it was Judges 10:6. Hence why they were still worshipping the Baals and Ashtoreths.

**This was literally their spiritual act of surrender.**

They chose to let go of the things they trusted their entire lives.  
And they chose to place ALL their trust in the LORD.

**That's sobering.**

Catch this...

**[SLIDE 11] The things that they let go were the things that fostered resistance to God's nearness.**

Suddenly we're not just learning a history lesson.

**Because Samuel's 3000-year-old words still speak just as loudly today!**

His words invite us to reflect on our own lives.

Samuel's not talking about outright rejection.

He's showing us that there are voices other than God's Word that compete for our attention.

His words invite us to ask ourselves:

*What are the things in my life that quietly cause me to resist God's nearness?*

*Where do I hesitate when God calls?*

**1 Samuel 7:4 shows us that when the moment finally came, Israel didn't hesitate.** They had enough false promises and false security. They were ready to go all-in... trusting Yahweh God with their very lives.

So they put away all their idols. And watch what happened when Samuel called them all to gather together...

**[SLIDE 12] 1 Samuel 7:6 - When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, "We have sinned against the LORD."**

They did what Eli and his sons couldn't do.

This wasn't just about doing the right things — such as putting away their idols. They *truly* repented.

Now the LORD was fighting on their side.

The Philistines attacked—but they were quickly subdued.

And throughout Samuel's lifetime, the LORD kept His hand of protection on them.

And here's a timeless truth this story shows us...

**[SLIDE 13] Israel's repentance didn't unlock God's love. God's love made repentance possible.**

For twenty+ years God didn't abandon His people.

Yes, His "glory departed" Israel...

But His presence was with Samuel for decades.

And His patience never failed...

Paul put it this way in Romans...

**[SLIDE 14] Romans 2:4b - God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance.**

That's exactly what we're seeing here.

**[SLIDE 15] God's patience made room for repentance to finally take root in Israel's heart.**

This is what Advent is all about.

Advent isn't about God showing up because people finally got it right.

Advent is about God entering the mess while people are still hesitant.

In fact, Christmas is the ultimate expression of Romans 2:4...

Jesus didn't arrive because people finally got it right.

He arrived because humanity lost their way and needed a Savior.

**That's God's *patient, steadfast and enduring* love.**

I had Lori read parts of Psalm 103 today because it helps us see God's love even more clearly...

**[SLIDE 16] Psalm 103:8 - The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.**

He was compassionate and gracious to Hannah, who desperately prayed for a child. And to Samuel, who answered the LORD's call.

He was slow to anger and abounding in love with the Israelites.

His judgement didn't come quickly... He displayed decades of patience.

And all along, His love was present through His patience and through raising up Samuel to lead them.

**This is the same God that's patient with us during those times we find ourselves resisting Him.**

**[SLIDE 17] Psalm 103:10 - he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.**

Israel didn't *deserve* His patience. They didn't *earn* His love.  
They didn't *earn* His forgiveness just because they did the right things.  
We can't *earn* any of that either...

**That's grace.**

It's a gift that's given out of His love for us the moment we put our faith in Him.

**[SLIDE 18] Psalm 103:11 - For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him.**

His love is unfailing, unchanging, unearned, *unmanipulatable*...  
and unequaled.

**[SLIDE 19] Psalm 103:12 - as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.**

Despite our past sins... or even hesitations...

We don't have to look back.  
The LORD's forgiveness wipes the slate clean.  
It's complete. It's unconditional.  
It's the kind of love a parent has for their child.

**[SLIDE 20] Psalm 103:17a - But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him.**

It's His love that enables us to press on in His strength.  
And even if we fail (*or hesitate*), His love doesn't stop.  
Instead, it reveals the areas where we can grow to trust Him even more.

**And that's been a main idea of this entire sermon:**

**[SLIDE 21] Hesitation is not the same as rejection, but it does reveal where trust needs to grow.**

Most of us in this room wouldn't say we've walked away from God.  
We still pray. We still worship. We still believe.

*But hesitation?*

That's something many of us recognize and have experienced.

It's those moments when we feel God's nearness...

We know in our hearts what the right thing to do is...

We don't deny it.

We might not even argue with it.

**We just... manage it.**

By *managing it*, I don't mean outright disobedience.

I mean we acknowledge what God is stirring in us...  
but we keep it at arm's length.

**For example:**

- We manage it when we sense God calling us to trust Him...  
but we still hold tightly to what feels safer.
- We manage it when we know we need to repair a relationship...  
but we delay the hard conversation.
- We manage it when we feel His nearness...  
but we stay busy enough not to sit with it too long.

That's what Israel was doing for twenty years.

They didn't completely reject the LORD.

They just kept Him... managed.

The Ark was present, but stored away.

God was acknowledged, but not fully trusted.

And yet, God didn't withdraw His love.

He stayed patient. He stayed near.

Because it's God's kindness that leads us to repentance.

**And so, today's passages invite us to ask ourselves...**

**[SLIDE 22] Where might God be gently revealing areas in my life where trust can grow?**

For me, I can tell you one area I'm still learning to trust is in my anxieties.

Certain things cause me anxiety — so I manage it by choosing to avoid those things. But once in a while I feel the LORD calling me to surrender control, and just trust Him.

And in those moments... there's *definite* hesitation.

For example, some of you already know I experience travel anxiety. Well, yesterday I took my daughter and niece to a convention in Pittsburgh.

Honestly, I wanted to take them when they asked.

But my anxiety held me back.

I definitely felt the LORD nudging me to do it — quality family time is always worth it...

But I hesitated to give them an answer for *two weeks!*

All I could think about was:

- four hours of driving there = anxiety
- standing in lines = anxiety
- large crowds = anxiety
- going somewhere unfamiliar = anxiety
- driving four hours back = anxiety

I realize this might sound a little silly — but for me this is a real struggle.

But there's something important I think all of us need to hear when it comes to struggling with the LORD's will...

**[SLIDE 23] Hesitation doesn't automatically mean we don't love God. But it does mean there's an area in our lives where trust is still growing.**

**And this is where Advent meets us.**

Advent love is God staying near even when we hesitate... even when we resist and try to manage things ourselves.

Not when trust is complete. But right in the middle of it growing.

So, some of us may find ourselves here today...

still believing... still praying...

but holding some things at arm's length...

Advent reminds us that Jesus is not distant.

He is near.

And **His love is patient enough to meet us right where we are.**

**Let's Pray**