

HERE I RAISE MY EBENEZER **1 Samuel 7:2-14**

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It was a difficult time for the people of Israel. Years earlier their army had been routed by the Philistines who now controlled large swaths of the Israeli countryside. Even the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of God's presence and power, had been captured by the Philistines, but they didn't keep it for long. It brought sickness among their people. So they returned it to Israel. Now it was residing in neglect at Kiriath Jearim. However, no one wanted to have anything to do with it, especially after the deaths of 70 men who had dared to look within this sacred treasure. The people of Israel were scared of their enemies and frightened of their God. They said, "Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God" (1 Samuel 6:20)? But after twenty years of suffering and hardship, they had finally come to their senses.

Once again they sought the Lord, and in response Samuel met with them. Samuel had been serving as a judge of Israel for many years. He had traveled from town to town settling their disputes with one another. Now he was meeting his people as a representative of the living God, serving both as priest and prophet. He said to them, "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 hands of the Philistines" (1 Samuel 7:3). The Israelites listened and they obeyed. They put away their Baals and the Ashtoreths and rededicated themselves unto the Lord.

In response, calling the people together, Samuel told them to meet him at Mizpah, a hilltop north of Jerusalem. There he led them in a rededication service. It began with a libation, a sacrificial offering of water that was poured out before the Lord, perhaps a declaration that they wished to be cleansed of their sins. They also fasted and publicly renounced their sinfulness. Additionally, perhaps for the first time, they acknowledged that Samuel was indeed their true and divinely appointed leader.

Their gathering did not, however, go unnoticed. The Philistines were evidently close by, and they decided to crush this public display of religious devotion. Gathering their forces they began marching towards Mizpah. The Israelites could hear them coming, the sounds of a mighty army drawing nearer, and they were frightened. 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" (1 Samuel 7:8). Instead of being frightened by the approaching enemy or swayed by the fear of his own countrymen, Samuel continued to do with what he had planned. This was a service of recommitment, and he knew that it must be sealed by a whole burnt offering, a young lamb offered unto the Lord as a visible and tangible declaration of their devotion. So here is the scene. The Philistines are advancing up the hillside beating on their shields and shouting insults. Meanwhile

with danger surrounding them on every side, Samuel is calmly offering a sacrifice to God. He has placed himself and all of those with him in harm's way. With undrawn weapons, the Israelites are worshipping the Lord even as their enemy approaches. Without divine intervention all would be lost.

But all was not lost because the Lord was ready to protect a people who had rededicated themselves unto Him. As he had done in the past, he spoke once again in the voice of thunder. For the Israelites the thunderclaps were a message declaring his presence and protection. For the Philistines, however, the thunderous message was one of outright terror. They were in the presence of a God who could utterly destroy them, just like the plague that had afflicted them when they took the Ark of the Covenant. In panic they turned and fled, and the Israelites chased them down the slopes and across the valleys with great slaughter all the way back to their cities on the seacoast.

Then after the battle was over Samuel once again gathered the people together, and he did something that had been done on many other occasions throughout the history of the people of Israel. He erected a memorial stone, a monument to God's deliverance, and he called it **Ebenezer**, which means "stone of help." He said to the people, "Thus far the LORD has helped us" (1 Samuel 7:12). And indeed He had. Throughout the remainder of Samuel's life, the Philistines were subdued, and Israel was even able to reclaim some of its lost territory.

So what does this marvelous Biblical account have to say to us today? There are three truths and one very poignant reminder that we need to take to heart. Here's the first one, and you'll find it repeated throughout the pages of the Bible. In fact, our pastor spoke about it two Sundays ago. **Repentance precedes revival.** In fact, it always precedes revival. There can be no revival for us as individuals, as a church family, indeed as an entire nation, until there is genuine, heartfelt repentance.

Israel suffered under the oppressive hand of the Philistines for over twenty years. During that time Samuel was their judge and their divinely appointed leader. He was a good and godly man but that didn't make any difference. I am confident that he did his best to lead the people of Israel in the right way. Nevertheless, nothing happened. They were still a desperate and defeated nation until they came to Mizpah and publicly confessed their sins. Repentance is required for divine deliverance. No repentance, no revival. And it's just as true today as it was three thousand years ago.

Let me be straight forwardly honest. America needs a revival. We have not had the kind of revival that genuinely transforms the nature and character of a nation in well over a hundred years. We have strayed from God. We have turned our backs on him. We have become a morally corrupt nation. We no longer honor his Word or trust in his guidance. Now, like Israel we find ourselves confronting a multitude of problems and facing a multitude of enemies. We will not escape them on our own. No matter what we do, they will overwhelm us. We need to remember and heed what this single verse of Scripture declares, "If my people, who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and forgive their sin and will heal their land" (1 Chronicles 7:14).

Here's the second truth. **Faith conquers fear.** Always has. Always will. Even though the people of Israel were shaking in their sandals as the Philistines approached, Samuel was cool, calm, and collected. Why do I know that? Because he continued offering the sacrifice even in the face of an impending disaster. He didn't run for cover. He didn't allow the circumstances of the moment to get in the way of his devotion to God. In my mind I can see Samuel standing before the altar with his hands extended toward heaven, trusting in the Lord in this their greatest hour of need. The writer of the New Testament book, 1 John, declares, "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). The kind of love that the author of this book is describing is not an emotional sentiment or feeling. He is talking about the kind of love that expresses itself in a faithful declaration of absolute dependence upon God.

How different this scene is from what took place on board a sailing vessel in 1736. John Wesley was on his way to America to preach to the Indians. During that voyage a storm engulfed the ship. Everyone was frightened except for a group of missionaries known as Moravians. They were calmly singing. Wesley made his way across the heaving ship and asked, "Aren't you frightened?" "No," they answered. "Not even the women and children who are with you?" he continued. "No," the Moravians said, "Not even our women and children." They had faith, something which Wesley did not possess at that point in his life. Fortunately, a few years later in a little chapel on Aldersgate Street in London, he found what he so desperately needed, an unshakeable faith in Christ and in Christ alone, and that made all the difference for the thousands upon thousands who were led to Christ during his remarkable ministry.

Now to the third truth. **Creation voices Creator.** Granted the wording is a bit convoluted, but not the truth which it summarizes. God can reveal Himself through His creation. In fact, He can even speak through that which He has made. Remember what took place when Moses and the Israelites met the Lord at the mountain of God. He spoke to them in the voice of thunder. In fact, in the book of Exodus, chapters 19 and 20, it appears that Moses and the Lord actually spoke to one another. They entered into a dialogue, Moses addressing the Lord and the Lord responding in the lightning and thunder, an encounter that made the Israelites tremble with fear, but one which Moses seemingly understood. For right within this encounter on the mountain you find in chapter 20 the very first recitation of the Ten Commandments, God's declaration of the way the Israelites were to live with him and with one another.

But that's not the only time that God has spoken in such a manner. In the New Testament in the Gospel of John, chapter 12, Jesus prayed out loud declaring, "Father, glorify your name." In response the Scriptures tell us, "Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it and I will glorify it again.' The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him" (John 12:28-29). In that same way on the day of battle at Mizpah, God clearly made his intentions known through the forces of nature, and his name, his power and glory were proclaimed in such a majestic manner that the Philistines fled in terror.

So, there you have it, three truths clearly proclaimed in chapter seven of 1 Samuel, and, indeed, reiterated over and over again throughout the Scriptures. **Repentance precedes revival. Faith conquers fear. Creation voices Creator.** Remember them. They are important. Also, take to heart one poignant reminder, one

concluding thought that each of us needs to treasure. We have a God who is our “stone of help,” our **Ebenezer**. Remember what Samuel said as he set up the memorial stone, “Thus far has the Lord helped us” (1 Samuel 7:12). In other words, the Lord has gotten us out of this mess and he will be there for us in the future as well. The same is true for us. The Lord is our stone, our rock, the One to whom we can cling when the going gets tough. He is the one who can deliver us from our enemies, whomever and whatever they be. Whether we’re facing individual trials, challenges confronting our families or even our church, or events that impact the entire nation, our God is there for us. When we turn to the Lord and cry out for help, he will not desert us. He is our stone of help. We can join with that great hymn writer, Sir Isaac Watts, and cry out, “O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.”

With that in mind let me conclude with this story. Years ago I met a through hiker on the Appalachian Trail. I met him in a lovely little town in southwestern Virginia named Damascus. We were having dinner at a local pizza restaurant. Striking up a conversation with this hiker, he shared a bit of his life’s story. A former drug addict with a criminal history, he had decided to hike the trail as a means of self-therapy, separating himself from the things that had been destroying his life, as well as providing an opportunity for some real soul searching as he climbed the ridges of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Along the way he had met some Christians right there in Damascus. They had befriended him with food and fellowship so that he could take a break from his trek. They had also introduced him to Jesus, but at first he wasn’t too interested. As he himself said, “Religion up to that point had not been a very important part of his life.” Then one night as he was camping alone up in the mountains near the town, a raging storm swept through that region of the state. The winds were howling and trees were falling. He didn’t mention it, but there might have been some lightning and thunder as well. The next morning his new friends at the church went in search of him. They were fearful that he had been injured during the storm. They found him. He wasn’t hurt but he had been transformed. He had met the Lord in the storm. He had come to terms with the waywardness of his life and had repented. His fear, not just of the storm but of what the future held in store for him, had been replaced with faith. For he had heard the voice of God in the midst of the storm, a voice that calmed his fears, not only of the trees crashing down around him but of those inner doubts which for so long had assailed him. That night he had clung to his stone of help, the presence of the Lord Almighty, the **Ebenezer** of his soul, and for him, and indeed for each and every one of us, that and that alone is sufficient.