

October 27, 2019
Sunday Morning Service
34th Anniversary
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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THE LORD HAS HELPED US 1 Samuel 7:1-12

Last week in the evening sermon, I mentioned that Thomas Boston, who wrote *The Crook in the Lot*, named a second son Ebenezer in place of the first son Ebenezer who had died. Sadly, the second son also succumbed at a young age. Boston named his sons Ebenezer on purpose because the name means, “Till now the LORD has helped us.” Or as the KJV puts it, “Hitherto, hath the Lord helped us.” So does the Lord help or does He not? Someone might be tempted to correct Boston’s view in light of the loss of two sons named Ebenezer.

Celebrating the 34th anniversary of a body of believers seems like an appropriate time for us to consider this truth. Has the Lord helped us up to this point? We who have been here for the long haul can say with absolute assurance that the Lord has helped us more than anyone can imagine. No doubt, the Lord has intervened in circumstances though invisible. He has interfered when we were ignorant that we were going the wrong direction. He has fought for us when most of us were unaware there was a spiritual battle. The Lord has blessed us beyond what we deserve. He has taught us about Himself and ourselves through the systematic preaching of His Word.

The Lord has certainly helped us as much as He helped His people in the early 11th century BC. God’s people had been fairly settled in the Promised Land for over 400 years. Compare that length of time to America’s history. During that time, the people had not been very settled in their relationship with their God. To graph their relationship with God would look a like a roller coaster at Six Flags – full of ups and downs and loops. They struggled with the continual temptations offered by the pagans and their gods among whom they

lived. They were a lot like many American Christians. And maybe like some of us.

In that setting, God raised up Samuel to lead His people to know Him and serve Him. God also raised up the Philistines to discipline His people and to remind them about how much they needed their Lord God. Those two entities, the prophet and the Philistines figure significantly in this text. The Philistines tried to destroy God’s people, and Samuel tried to gather God’s people into God’s presence where they would find safety. It is right that the conflict this time would end with the picture of Samuel setting up a stone of remembrance and naming it Ebenezer, “Until now the Lord has helped us.”

Likewise, it is fitting for us, on this day of special celebration, to remember the same important truth. The Lord has helped us for thirty-four years. And we know that we can call on Him to help us for the next years, for as long as He tarries, and He will help us.

God’s People Long for His Presence (vv.1-2).

Why would God’s people long for His presence when He had already promised to be near? Apparently, the people forgot that God promised to be present at the ark of the covenant. That was the ark that *the men of Kiriath-jearim came and took up the ark of the LORD and brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill (v.1a)*. After the “scare” of the Philistines taking the ark, maybe it became more important than a lucky charm to God’s people.

From the outset of His relationship with His people, God established the purpose of the ark of the covenant. When God gave Moses the instructions for building the ark He promised, “*There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel*” (*Exodus 25:22*). Notice from this verse that God promised to meet with His people above the mercy seat which was on top of the ark. Also, God promised to speak with His people from that place. Of course, God would meet with and speak to the representative (mediator) of His people (Aaron and later the high priests). Also, at the ark and mercy seat, God accepted the blood of the bull as a

covering for the sins of His people on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:14-16).

We probably cannot grasp the full importance of the ark in God's relationship with His people. Essentially, it was the physical representation symbol of God meeting with His people. And yet, while it is difficult for us to comprehend how important the ark was, the Church pictures that same kind of blessing for God's people today. It is true that God is omnipresent. His presence is everywhere. David wondered, *Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you (Psalm 139:7-12).*

But our Lord promised to meet specifically with us and talk to us in the gatherings of His people. Jesus promised us, *"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matthew 18:20)*. Paul reminded Pastor Timothy that it is in that setting of the gathering of Christ's followers that we hear God speak. *Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching (1 Timothy 4:13)*. It is also in that setting we challenge each other to be more like our Master and Savior. *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Hebrews 10:24-25)*. We need to meet together in the presence of God.

We also learn from this text that God put men in charge of the symbol of "His presence." *And they consecrated his son Eleazar to have charge of the ark of the LORD (v.1b)*. Eleazar was a name connected with the priesthood which might indicate that this man was from the priestly line of Aaron. Be that as it may, the sad truth is that the priests taken from among humans tended to be as faulty as other humans. Some of the very first priests failed fatally (Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron). Nevertheless, God's plan utilizes humans. So in a similar way, God still uses mere humans to lead the Church, the

chief point of His presence with His people. And too often the human leaders in the Church are no more faithful than the ancient priests who served the ark.

God's presence was promised at the ark. But at times God's people are not near His presence. According to our text, long periods of time can pass. *From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years (v.2a)*. For twenty years the ark was not at the tabernacle, wherever that was located. This means that the people were not doing the sacrificial worship according to God's law.

Those ancient Israelites were much like professing Christians who abandon the fellowship of the Church for long periods of time. I always wonder how they can do that with a clear conscience? Why doesn't the Holy Spirit, who is living within them, convict them of not obeying God's rule? Maybe the problem is that the Holy Spirit is not living within some of those people, which means they are not really followers of Christ.

Separation from God causes His people sorrow. The ark was not in the proper place for twenty years, *and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD (v.2b)*. This statement is interesting in that the people were not lamenting because they had been defeated by the pagan Philistines. For the people of God to be defeated by the enemy who God had promised to defeat must have been quite a blow to their faith. Do you know the feeling of spiritual defeat? Does it bother you to fail in your commitment to Christ?

When we falter and stumble into sin, we might lament the truth of God's promise through John. *Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world (1John 4:4)*. If that is true, why do we experience spiritual failure?

Notice from our text that the sorrow among God's people was for fellowship with God. The symbol of His presence with them was not where it should have been. Something was amiss in their spiritual lives. This would be like some circumstance or situation coming into your life that prevents you from meeting with the Church. Is it possible that Satan can deceive a person into thinking that being in the presence of God for corporate worship and teaching doesn't matter? So the Christian buys into the lie, then is miserable from lack

of fellowship, but can't quite pinpoint the reason for the misery. In Israel, the people knew that they were separated from God. Samuel was about to explain the real problem to them.

God's People Need to Return (vv.3-6).

Samuel explained that if the people were going to return to God, it would require them to leave their idols. The only way that would happen is if there was heart-felt repentance. *And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines" (v.3).*

We are not surprised to learn from Samuel's brief sermon that the real problem that was causing the absence of God was sin. That is always the problem. It appears that the people as a whole finally were tired of their misery and desired to return to God in their hearts. The ark being in the wrong place was only a picture of what was going on in the people's lives.

But partial repentance, convenient changing of the mind, somewhat of a return would not solve the problem. Like all of God's people who wander off into sin, they needed to return to God with their whole hearts. No doubt, even while these people fooled around with cultural gods, they still claimed to be God's people. No doubt they still looked to God as their heavenly Father. But their hearts were divided. While they claimed relationship with God on one hand, with the other hand they held on to the gods of their culture.

Ashtoreth (the singular form of Ashtaroth) was worshiped by nearly all the middle eastern cultures in Old Testament times. She was the goddess of fertility whose counterpart was the male figure Baal. So Ashtaroth and Baals were common stumbling blocks for God's people. The fact that Samuel did not mention the male counterpart Baal in this challenge might present an interesting possibility. It makes us wonder if the people had come to think of the pagan goddess Ashtoreth as the consort of Yahweh the true God. That would demonstrate the depths of sin into which even God's people can sink when they abandon God's presence.

We must admit that the people of God still struggle with the gods of the age. The god of pleasure interrupts the fellowship of God's people all the time. The god of possessions distracts God's people from service to Him. The god of popularity causes God's people to adopt religious practices that are actually in conflict with God's character. The god of position silences any activity that might make the Christian unacceptable. The god of political correctness is neutering the power of God's truth in many Christians. The god of perfectionism sinks well-meaning Christians in the pit of self-righteousness and self-sufficiency. The god of pride turns God's people into Pharisaical hypocrites.

Repentance is the only acceptable response for people who have ignored the true God in favor of cultural gods. Like the Israelites, we too must *put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only(v.3b)*. There was a negative and a positive requirement in Samuel's advice. Negatively, the people needed to get rid of their idols. The first step in returning to God is to identify the cultural gods that have stolen your heart from God. The second step is to abandon them with the help and strength of God's grace. You cannot imagine how hard it is to cut a false god out of your life until you have tried it. When you start dumping the cultural gods, your cultural peers will notice and will very likely put pressure on you.

Positively, Samuel rightly advises the penitent sinner to direct your heart to the Lord. The only way to keep the gods you remove out of your life is to focus on the Lord. This is the same principle Jesus taught about the man who was released from the power of the demon, but not turning his heart to God, he was soon indwelt by seven worse demons (Luke 11:26).

A heart directed toward God looks like a heart that longs to hear God speak from His Word. We hear from God by reading His Word, by listening to the preaching of His Word, and by being taught in His Word. The heart directed toward God also longs to talk to God through prayer. That kind of heart also longs to be with and interact with people who also love God, and it longs to serve God.

Obviously, that kind of repentance will not be done in secret. Returning to God is demonstrable (vv.4-6). It is generally pretty obvious when a person abandons his or her idols. *So the people of*

Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and they served the LORD only (v.4). The Canaanite way of life was opposed to God's clear teaching in so many ways. Therefore, the only sure evidence that God's people were changing their ways was to dump the popular cultural way of life.

When we dump the gods of our culture, it will be obvious. The change in our lives becomes obvious because the gods of our culture are so opposed to the character of our God. We all reflect the character of the God or gods we embrace. That reflection is obvious to others.

Also, when there is true repentance, that truth is affirmed in confession. *Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you." So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the LORD and fasted on that day and said there, "We have sinned against the LORD." And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah (vv.5-6).*

The word Mizpah, means "watchtower" which is a fitting description of this place that watched over the valley. At that place God's people gathered to demonstrate repentance. In so doing, they poured out water before the Lord. That kind of sacrifice is not required in the Law of Moses. This was a "pouring out" of an essential element of life, a fitting picture of sacrifice. It was a sacrifice before the Lord.

This "pouring out" is a reminder that no one ever repents without experiencing sacrifice. It is difficult for us to be honest and admit that forsaking our idol is a sacrifice of our natural desires. Being viewed as a "misfit" because we don't serve the cultural idols anymore will also be a sacrifice. But along with the pouring out, the people's fasting showed the same kind of attitude in repentance. The very important conclusion was that embracing of cultural gods was sinning against the one true God. To repent is to call sin what it really is.

God is Faithful to Help (vv.7-12).

When the child of God repents and returns to God's presence, the enemy attacks are almost certain (vv.7-8). In our text is the vivid picture of how God's enemy attacks God's people. *Now when the*

Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel (v.7a). It is a picture of how the culture often reacts adversely to the repentance of God's people. We forget sometimes that the culture is loyal to and governed by God's archenemy Satan. We forget how much influence Satan has in the anti-Christ culture.

Therefore, we get surprised when the culture reacts negatively. Peter warns us that our culture doesn't accept the fact that God's people must be different. *With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you (1 Peter 4:4).* He reminded us not to be surprised by this reaction. *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you (1 Peter 4:12-14).* John also taught us, *Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you" (1 John 3:13).*

The negative cultural reaction was a very important test because the last battle against the Philistines (20 years earlier, 1 Samuel 4) was a disastrous loss for Israel. Will they endure this test? Will you endure the test when you decide to stand in God's truth for God's glory?

We will endure only when our fear cries for help. *And when the people of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines. And the people of Israel said to Samuel, "Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us, that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines" (vv.7b-8).* This was a far different reaction from the last battle. In the last battle, God's people treated the symbol of God's presence as a good luck charm. In this battle, God's people desired the attention of the God who the symbol represented.

In the time of testing, some people treat the Church like a good luck charm. There have been a few times over the years when someone who had been a part of this assembly in the past wandered off into sin. In a couple of cases, the person got so deep into sin that they were apprehended. In both cases, the offender quickly appealed to their relationship with the church as a character witness.

When the people of God are tested by God's enemy, they need to cry out to God for help. It is true that God ordains the body of believers. It is true that we must be involved in helping, in strengthening, in supporting each other in times of need. But it is also true that we are all forgiven sinners who too often disappoint. God never disappoints.

Samuel heard the people, saw their genuine repentance, and reminded them that until now the Lord has helped (vv.9-12). He demonstrated how God's help for His people is rooted in sacrifice. *So Samuel took a nursing lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. And Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him (v.9).* The sacrifice indicated open fellowship with God. It was a vicarious atonement. God required the blood as a covering for the offenses the people confessed.

This is precisely the picture of the atonement offered to us in Christ's blood as the covering for our sins. We confess our sins, then, like Samuel, cry out to the Lord for help. The Lord answers. And when the Lord answers, we realize that His help is real. *As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel. But the LORD thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion, and they were routed before Israel. And the men of Israel went out from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them, as far as below Beth-car (vv.10-11).*

For the ancient Israelites, in this case, God's answer was a supernatural control of natural elements. For us, it may not be so supernatural. And yet we often experience God arranging circumstances for our benefit. God always leads us in a path that we sometimes do not see until later that has placed us in His will. God gives peace of heart and confidence even in tumultuous circumstances.

An important key is for us to remember the times when God has intervened to help. *Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer; for he said, "Till now the LORD has helped us" (v.12).* It is good for us to write answers to prayer in our journal. At the very least, we must make a mental note of all the times God has heard and answered our cries for

help. The time will come in your spiritual warfare when you will need to remember the Lord's help.

It is good for us as a church, a body of believers, to remember how the Lord has helped us. Yes, we rejoice in the physical manifestations of His help – like this very suitable facility. But today let's think about how God has brought us and continues to bring us as a corporate body to reflect His character more clearly in a culture that is more and more opposed to His character.