

## **“Ebenezer”**

### **1 Samuel 7:1-17**

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#### **Introduction:**

This morning, I wonder if we could think back to a time from our past when we have had to call out for help. Perhaps it goes back to a scene from when we were little children. Perhaps some of us have had to call 911 and have had to call on help from the police or fire department. Perhaps we have needed an ambulance. Perhaps others have had to ask for advice on something in order to get out of a sticky situation. And then, of course, there are other times when we have had to call out directly to God. And certainly in those times we appreciate the words of God from the book of Isaiah in **Isaiah 41:10**, ***“Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.”*** Those are comforting words!

And yet we know that there are times when God does not seem very close to us. This morning, I would like for us to look at one of those times from the Bible, and the lesson itself comes as the result of a question from one of the young women of the congregation. In fact, she has asked me two times over the past week, and her question was so sincere that I actually changed my schedule so that I could preach on her question this morning. Two times, she has asked the question: **What is an Ebenezer?** What an excellent question! And above all, it shows that our children are listening to the songs that we sing. I think it was last Sunday morning that we sang #500—**“O Thou Fount of Every Blessing.”** And in the second verse of that song, we sang these words, **“Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by Thy help I’ve come; and I hope by Thy good pleasure safely to arrive at home. Jesus sought me when a stranger, wand’ring from the fold of God; He to rescue me from danger interposed His precious blood.”** This morning, therefore, as we study what it means to call on God for help, I would like for us to study this good question—**What is an Ebenezer?**

First of all, **\*\*PPT\*\*** we are not talking about Ebenezer Scrooge from The Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens. **\*\*PPT\*\*** I should also point out that we are not talking about a jewelry store outside of an American military base in South Korea. **\*\*PPT\*\*** We are not talking about a particular kind of model plane quite popular in Britain. **\*\*PPT\*\*** We are not talking about Ebenezer Ale, brewed in Portland, Oregon. **\*\*PPT\*\*** We are not talking about Ebenezer Ekuban, a defensive end for the Denver Broncos (this Ebenezer, by the way, was born in Accra, Ghana, and moved to the US at the age of 7 when his father took a job at the Ghana embassy in

Washington DC). **\*\*PPT\*\*** But rather, we are talking about a stone that is referred to in the Old Testament book of **1 Samuel 7**.

As I started looking at this passage, I realized that I have already preached on it once before—here in Madison—way back on November 4, 2000. I noticed in my notes that were scribbled in the margin that I announced that morning the results of an ultrasound—that we were going to have a girl! So, a lot has changed over the past almost 7 years—this is practically a different congregation, and so I hope you will forgive me if we go back and look at that passage again as we answer the question that was raised by one of the children of this congregation. And again, it is found in **1 Samuel 7**. The people of Israel needed God's help, but they had not been getting it. And with that, we come to **1 Samuel 7:1-14**...

***<sup>1</sup> And the men of Kiriath-jearim came and took the ark of the LORD and brought it into the house of Abinadab on the hill, and consecrated Eleazar his son to keep the ark of the LORD. <sup>2</sup> From the day that the ark remained at Kiriath-jearim, the time was long, for it was twenty years; and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD. <sup>3</sup> Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, "If you return to the LORD with all your heart, remove the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your hearts to the LORD and serve Him alone; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines." <sup>4</sup> So the sons of Israel removed the Baals and the Ashtaroth and served the LORD alone. <sup>5</sup> Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel to Mizpah and I will pray to the LORD for you." <sup>6</sup> They gathered to 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 sons of Israel at Mizpah. <sup>7</sup> Now when the Philistines heard that the sons of Israel had gathered to Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the sons of Israel heard it, they were afraid of the Philistines. <sup>8</sup> Then the sons of Israel said to Samuel, "Do not cease to cry to the LORD our God for us, that He may save us from the hand of the Philistines." <sup>9</sup> Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it for a whole burnt offering to the LORD; and Samuel cried to the LORD for Israel and the LORD answered him. <sup>10</sup> Now Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, and the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel. But the LORD thundered with a great thunder on that day against the Philistines and confused them, so that they were routed before Israel. <sup>11</sup> The men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and struck them down as far as below Beth-car. <sup>12</sup> Then Samuel took a stone and set it between Mizpah and Shen, and named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the LORD has helped us." <sup>13</sup> So the Philistines were subdued and they did not come anymore within the border of Israel. And the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. <sup>14</sup> The cities which the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron even to Gath; and Israel delivered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. So there was peace between Israel and the Amorites.***

This morning, I want us to get familiar with that word Ebenezer, and I hope we get to the point where we can use it. People may think we are a little weird, but it is a good word. This morning, then, as we think about calling on God for help, I'd like for us to consider what happened here. We'll look at the hopeless situation, we'll consider what the people did, how God responded, and then finally what all of this should mean for those of us here this morning.

**I. First of all, though, we need to remember that THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL WERE IN A HOPELESS SITUATION (verses 1-2). **\*\*PPT\*\*****

In fact, the whole thing is summarized in the opening chapters of the book of **1 Samuel**. By the time we get to our text for this morning, the situation has already been pretty bad for about twenty years. Twenty years earlier, the people had fallen away from God, and their defeat by the Philistines was so bad that they lost more than 30,000 soldiers. The two sons of the high priest were killed in the battle, and when the high priest heard of it, he fell out of his chair and died. Not only that, but the Ark of the Covenant had been captured in the battle. We remember that the Ark represented the presence of God—it was the place where the nation came to have their sins forgiven.

Well, when the daughter-in-law of the high priest heard these things, she went into premature labor, and with her dying breath, she named her son, "***Ichabod***," saying, "***The glory has departed from Israel.***" This was a very, very bad and discouraging situation—a national disgrace. Well, after several months, the Philistines finally sent the Ark back to Israel, but even at that point, the Israelites were so unfaithful to God they really didn't know what to do with it themselves, and so they basically parked it somewhere—and it stayed there for about twenty years, which brings us to **1 Samuel 7**. I think you might agree that it sounds pretty bad at this point. And then in **1 Samuel 7:2**, we find that the people of Israel had been lamenting (or mourning) apparently throughout this twenty year period. They were mourning that God's glory had departed from Israel, and yet according to **verses 3-4**, apparently they were still worshiping the pagan gods—the Baals and the Asherahs (or the female version of Baal).

Well, as bad as it was, the situation was predicted through Moses several hundred years earlier in **Deuteronomy 31:16-18**. As Moses was getting ready to die, "***The LORD said to Moses, 'Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers; and this people will arise and play the harlot with the strange gods of the land, into the midst of which they are going, and will forsake Me and break My covenant which I have made with them. Then My anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide My face from them, and they will be consumed, and many evils and troubles will come upon them; so that they will say in that day, "Is it not because our God is not among us that these evils have come upon us?" But I will surely hide My face in that day because of all the evil which they will do, for they will turn to other gods.'***" And so over this twenty year period, God was fulfilling His

promise—that He would turn away because of the unfaithfulness of the Israelites. According to **verse 2**, the people were crying—but God was not listening.

To me, it sounds a little bit like a husband whose wife throws him out of the house because of his adultery—the husband wants to come back in because he misses his wife—he is so sad for being kicked out, but he continues to go out with other women! The wife has no obligation to let that man back in. And in a similar way, Israel was suffering—they were at a low point—but they continued to worship the other gods.

Hopefully, none of us are at that point this morning...but it is possible. Perhaps someone has known the way of God in the past but has drifted over time. Perhaps something has pulled you away. Perhaps you walked away at one time. Perhaps you just wandered or were overcome by a temptation. Every single one of us can understand the pull of the world. But when we walk away, the relationship breaks. And that brings us to what happens next as the prophet Samuel urges the people to turn back to God.

## **II. And at this point, we have a record of WHAT THE PEOPLE DID (verses 3-9). **\*\*PPT\*\*****

Samuel spoke to everyone, and the whole nation gathered together, and Samuel gave them a choice. He told them to return to the Lord with all their hearts, to remove the foreign gods, and to direct their hearts to God and serve God alone. If they did these things, Samuel promised that God would deliver them from the Philistines. And then in the next few verses, the people obeyed and they made a long-term commitment.

In **verse 6**, they confessed their sins publicly. We have learned before that the confession should be just as public as the sin. A private sin can be confessed privately to God, but a public sin (something that the whole church knows about) needs to be confessed to the whole congregation. And when someone falls away from God, it is a public sin. In order for that fellowship to be restored, the sin must be confessed. We need to make it clear that we have messed up and that we are now committed to making things right with God and our Christian family.

We also see in **verse 6** that they illustrated their commitment with a very graphic demonstration. The Bible says that they, "***...drew water and poured it out before the Lord.***" What was that about? We know that water was a precious commodity. It was used for drinking, and cooking, and cleaning. But here we find that they draw water and pour it out on the ground. As I see it, they were making a statement that their repentance was to be permanent.

Once we pour out water on the ground, it seeps in, it evaporates, and there is no way to get it back again. We have watered our garden quite a bit this summer. As I remember it, our water bill usually comes sometime in November. What if November comes around and I want a refund on my water? What if I write a letter to Mayor Dave and ask for my money back? That would be an impossible request, because

once the water spills out on the ground, it is gone! And in the same way, when we repent of our sins, those sins should stay behind us in the past.

So the people of Israel were sad, they confessed what they had done, and then they actually removed the idols. They separated themselves from the sinful behavior, and they served the Lord with sincerity.

For just a moment, we should try to imagine what it would look like if we were to serve the Lord wholeheartedly. What would it look like if we gave our full attention to doing the will of God? How would our lives be different? Are there sins that we would no longer commit? How would it change our relationships? Would we start developing different habits? I think we understand that good intentions have to be followed up with action. We actually have to turn around. We have to repent and replace the bad with the good.

Maybe this week we can take just a small step in the right direction. Maybe we can read the Bible for an extra minute every night—just a few verses at a time and then think about those verses as we fall asleep. There are a number of little things that we can do to get closer to God.

So at this point the people have hit rock bottom, they have made a commitment to turn around, which then brings us to an immediate test. As the nation is assembled to worship, the Philistines come to do battle (verse 10)...

### **III. And in verses 10-14 we have THE RESOLUTION OF THE WHOLE SITUATION AS THE PEOPLE RESPOND TO THE GRACE OF GOD.**

**\*\*PPT\*\***

We notice in verse 10 that the Lord "**thundered**" against the Philistines. What amazes me is that battle-hardened soldiers who had been living, training, and fighting in the outdoors were so terrified of the thunder that they scattered in all directions. We understand it when our little children are afraid of the thunder, but these were soldiers. Not only that, but we should also note that Baal was supposedly the god of storms. It is interesting, then, that God uses thunder against the Philistines! And so the Lord wins the battle, and the Israelites chase them down. There is no debate, then, that the Israelites were saved by the grace of God. Sometimes people try to make the point that under the Old Testament God was all law and no grace, and under the New Testament that God is all grace and no law. And yet here we have a clear example of the grace of God in the Old Testament.

And we find in verse 12 that Samuel reacts to the grace of God by raising a stone, and he names it "**Ebenezer.**" Literally translated, the word Ebenezer means, "**Stone of Help,**" and he gives the reason for the name in verse 12 by saying, "**Thus far the Lord has helped us.**" And so the people remembered God's help. In an interesting twist, the stone of help is raised up in the exact same place where the Israelites were defeated by the Philistines, where Eli's sons were killed, and where the Ark of God was stolen twenty years earlier.

Have you noticed any parallels between what happened here in **1 Samuel 7** and how God helps us today? Have we thought about the fact that (in **verse 9**) a perfect lamb was offered as a sacrifice? Are we not also saved by the sacrifice of a perfect lamb? Have we thought about the fact that water was connected to their decision to start a new life? In a similar way, water is also a crucial part of our death to sin, our burial with Christ, and our resurrection to live a new life. Under the New Covenant, do we not have a memorial to remember what the Lord has done? On the first day of every week, we partake of the Lord's Supper, to remember the death of Christ on the cross—to remember our own salvation.

Today, then, if God has saved us from sin, we can also say (in a symbolic sense), **"Here I raise my Ebenezer!"** If God has helped us through a difficult situation, if God has shared our burdens, if God has brought joy into our lives, if God has been with us—then we can understand the significance of what Samuel did. He raised up a stone and referred to it as the **"Stone of Help"**—the Ebenezer.

The Ebenezer represented a fresh beginning—a change of course—a u-turn. From that point on, the people of Israel could look back and they could know how long it had been since their lives had changed for the better. As I was preparing this morning's lesson, I thought for a moment about Alcoholics Anonymous and the good work that is being done through that program. I have only been to a few meetings, but the emphasis has always been on the number of days that people have managed to stay sober. For some, the time is measured in years or even in decades. For others, the time is measured in months, or weeks, or even days—one day at a time. They do not focus on the years that have been spent in drunkenness, but they focus back on that moment when their lives were changed, and they count time from the moment of that change. In a similar way, those of us as Christians have had an Ebenezer moment. We can think back to the way it used to be, and we praise God for bringing us through those difficult times. We thank God for the new direction!

### **Conclusion & Invitation:**

And so as we close this morning, we need to think back to the song that we sometimes sing—the song that led to this morning's lesson. As we sing about raising our Ebenezer, let us sing that song with understanding. Let us sing that song as we think back to the help that God has given to us. Let us sing that song with deep feeling. Whenever Satan suffers a defeat in our lives, whenever we overcome a challenge with God's help, we can sing the song that we have studied this morning, and we can understand what it means. Every time we sing it, let us remember the times when God has helped us. Let us explain the song to those around us. And let us explain this song to our children as we tell them what this song means to us. Let us explain the Ebenezer moment in our own lives.

When Samuel raised the Ebenezer, it was a turning point in the history of God's people. They had suffered for twenty years as a result of turning away from God, but after the preaching of God's word they had a change of heart, they set aside their idols, and they turned their lives back toward God.

This morning as we sing, let us make the same resolution—that from this moment forward we will remember the help that God has given to us. The greatest victory we will ever have in this life is when we obey the gospel, because that moment is a turning point. With that in mind, we come to the final verse of #500, **“O to grace how great a debtor daily I’m constrained to be! Let Thy goodness like a fetter bind my wand’ring heart to Thee; Never let me wander from Thee, never leave the God I love; here’s my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for Thy courts above.”**

There may be someone here this morning who has wandered away from God very slowly. We would like to ask you to think back to the time when you were released from your sins for the very first time. Didn’t it feel wonderful to come up out of the water—knowing that every sin had been forgiven? It is possible to have that feeling again. Like the Israelites, maybe you have been without God for the past twenty years. You know that there is something missing in your life—you know that things are not quite right. Maybe it has not been 20 years—maybe it has been 3 weeks. As a congregation, we would love to pray on your behalf. We would like to encourage you to stay close to God starting at this moment.

On the other hand, maybe you are here this morning and you have never obeyed the gospel. Maybe you are at the point where you are ready to pour your sins out like water on the ground—being completely open and honest toward God. If you are ready to take that step, then you are also ready to submit your body to an immersion in water—putting your faith in God and knowing that God has the power to take away your sins. If you are ready to return or to come to Jesus for the very first time, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [church@fourlakescoc.org](mailto:church@fourlakescoc.org)

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