

1. The Rock of Help delivers us

For the month of May, we'll be looking at how the Lord God provided his covenant people Israel with a king. We'll be looking at how God used Samuel, a prophet and judge of the Lord, to end the age of Judges and begin the age of Kings for his people Israel. Today, we'll be reading from 1 Samuel 7, a passage about Israel turning to the Lord after years of disobedience. *Read 1 Samuel 7:3-12.*

Now in the years before our reading, Israel had been disobedient to the Lord. They had tried to control him by bringing his ark to the battlefield, but God had let his people be disciplined by having them defeated. His ark was returned on his own terms with a display of his own power. You can read about that in chapters 4 through 6 if you're interested.

But now it's been 20 years since they had been defeated by the Philistines, had their priests killed, and the ark captured. It's been 20 years since the ark of the Lord being returned, but not properly placed in the Lord's tabernacle, the tent where he met with his people. And it's now, after years of sorrow, that the people of Israel repented and lamented after the Lord. Samuel instructed them to put away their idols, and they listened.

But in listening, their enemies the Philistines heard about it, and they decided to come defeat the Israelites again. But Israel now knew that they could be destroyed without the help of God. So they asked Samuel to pray to the Lord. He took a lamb and offered it as a burnt offering, in accordance with the law. He cried out to the Lord on behalf of Israel, praying as their leader, as the judge whom the Lord their God had sent. We see here in verse 7 a man of God asking the Lord to forgive the sins of his people, who had repented. They made public confession of their sins there at Mizpah, "We have sinned against the Lord." Since they repented from their sins and idolatry, and gathered to call upon the Lord, he responded in kind. Verse 9 tells us, "and the Lord answered him."

God responded with power and with might. He thundered with a mighty sound, and they were thrown into confusion! Psalm 18 speaks of the Lord thundering from heaven, and scattering the enemy, about the Lord hearing the cries of the faithful, about how he shields

those who take refuge in him, and how he is the Rock who keeps his people secure. The aftermath of the battle was decisive. The Philistines were soundly defeated, and they were struck down by the Israelites.

To commemorate that great victory, where the Lord visibly demonstrated his power and mercy toward his beloved people, the ones who had turned to him in repentance, Samuel set up a monument, a stone which was named Ebenezer. This means Stone of Help. Not a little river stone, but a mighty stone set up as a monument, as a public testimony to God's response to his covenant people when they turn to him in repentance.

Ebenezer stood as a monument to Israel of God's faithfulness to his promises. He had heard of their repentance, he received their burnt offering in grace, and he looked upon them with favour. If they had not repented, had they stuck to their idols, they would have remained under the power of the Philistines. But the Lord, in his good pleasure, turned their hearts to repentance, and they cried out to him. Ebenezer stood as a testimony to that, "The Lord is our help, he is our refuge."

It can be very easy for us today to become discouraged in our tasks, in our struggle with sin. We can find ourselves on dark paths, pushed to our limits, pushed to despair. We can wonder at the situations we're placed in, at the difficulties that face us. Social isolation is taking a terrible toll upon us in the midst of this pandemic. But Ebenezer still stands! Perhaps the physical rock that Samuel erected after the battle is not present, yet the Stone of help remains steadfast throughout the ages.

Indeed, there is a much greater display of God enduring his people and providing a path to help and salvation following repentance in the work of Christ Jesus our Lord. Because of what he has done, we can say with confidence Ebenezer, "The Lord has helped us until now."

He is a rock and a refuge and a help for us. There are no paths too dark today for us to turn back from, for there will never be a time when we are not able to say, "God is our help until now." We know this to be true to us, since he experienced the opposite for us on the cross. There he was rejected so that we might be accepted. He was forsaken so that we might be helped. He could not cry out, "until now my God is my help," but only, "My god, my god,

why have you forsaken me?" He was rejected so that God might help us, not only until now, but forevermore!

Take time to reflect upon the sins and the impact sin has upon your life, upon the lives of those around you. Sin is a terrible reality, and because of sin death and suffering has entered into the world. The pandemic that has gripped this world is only in the world because of sin. But this pandemic, the suffering and death it brings, indeed all suffering, is not where the world is left. Christ Jesus promises to be your Ebenezer, as he showed so vividly to the Israelites in Samuel's day, as he showed to the world in his suffering, culminated in his crucified body upon the cross. He promises to be your cornerstone, your firm foundation, your Rock of help if you look to him in repentance. May it be your daily prayer as you confess your sins and ask his support to fight them, "Until now the Lord has helped us."