

1 Samuel Chapter 7

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- [0 : 00] line up there, that's not where we're going to be turning to. We're going to be 1 Samuel chapter 7 and considering the events surrounding that verse 12 concerning the stone called Ebenezer.
- 1 Samuel in chapter 7. And we're going to read from verse 2. Verse 2 to the end of the chapter.
- It was a long time, twenty years in all, that the ark remained at Kiriath-Jerim. And all the people of Israel mourned and sought after the Lord.
- Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, 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, serve the Lord only. Then Samuel said, Assemble all Israel at Mizpah, and I will intercede with the Lord for you.
- [1 : 12] 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.
- And Samuel was leader of Israel at Mizpah. When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled at Mizpah, the rulers of the Philistines came up to attack them.
- When the Israelites heard of it, they were afraid because of the Philistines. 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.
- And Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. He cried out to the Lord on Israel's behalf, and the Lord answered him. While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle.
- But that day the Lord thundered with a loud thunder against the Philistines, and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites. The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth-kar.
- [2 : 22] Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, Thus far has the Lord helped us. So the Philistines were subdued and did not invade Israel's territory again.
- Throughout Samuel's lifetime, the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines. The towns from Ekron to Gath that the Philistines had captured from Israel were restored to her. And Israel delivered the neighboring territory from the power of the Philistines.
- And there was peace between Israel and the Amorites. Samuel continued as judge over Israel all the days of his life. From year to year he went on a circuit from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah, judging Israel in all those places.
- But he always went back to Ramah, where his home was. And there he also judged Israel. And he built an altar there to the Lord. If you have a Bible at hand, and I hope that you do, then please turn to 1 Samuel in chapter 7, which we read just a few moments ago, and particularly that verse, verse 12.

Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. Then he named it Ebenezer, saying, Thus far has the Lord helped us. The very mention of the name Ebenezer immediately conjures up one person in our minds.

[3 : 54] That is Ebenezer Scrooge, the villainous character from Charles Dickens' Christmas Carol. In spite of having the name Ebenezer, Scrooge was nothing like a stone of help.

Through 95% or more of the book, he is a greedy, pitiless, hard man who squeezes from his tenants and those he's lent money to every penny he can.

No concern if he has to throw them out to the streets. He even is hard and uncaring and harmful even to his faithful manager of his accounting department, Bob Cratchit, being forced in one sense to give them a day off on Christmas Day against his will.

It's only at the very end, of course, of the story as he encounters all sorts of strange dreams and visits that he does begin to live up to his name and becomes a help and a man of generosity, giving and sharing and supporting those in need.

And so that name Ebenezer comes from here, this passage in the Bible, where we're told that Saul named a stone Ebenezer, set up a stone and named it Ebenezer.

[5 : 19] In one sense, it was a monument. We have those sort of things around the country, don't we? Monuments to victories. There's Nelson's column, of course, in Trafalgar Square, celebrating the great victory of Trafalgar.

Nelson won all those years ago. And in other places as well, there are memorials to victories, to triumphs in warfare or to God's goodness to us as a nation in that way.

And here, Samuel, because of the victory that God had given him and the Israelites over their enemies, the Philistines, this memorial, this rock is set up to mark that victory and given the name Ebenezer.

Now, as I said at the very beginning, I think it's important. I believe in anniversaries. I believe that we should mark occasions where we can look back and say, thus far has the Lord helped us.

I think it's important that we do that. And it's not because I want to draw attention to myself in any way, but because of this first anniversary of being minister here that I want to do something slightly different.

[6 : 30] We are in Exodus. As you can tell, we're going to be thinking about this passage particularly because I want us to understand how pertinent this is to us at this junction in our relationship as minister and church or as church altogether and how applicable it is to us as well as individuals.

Because I think these words of Samuel have great help to us, great encouragement to us, and great faith to us as well. Thus far has the Lord helped us.

And I want to examine the words of Samuel and this situation, but take his words backwards from end to beginning and begin with that word us.

Who were the us that the Lord had helped up to that point? Well, of course, we know that they were the Israelites. And we know who the Israelites were. They were God's chosen people, those special people that he had called and set apart for himself from the world around about to serve him, to honor him, to live for him, to be a testimony before him, and to bring glory to his name.

And to them he gave great blessings, especially this land of Israel that they were occupying, Canaan, as it was called, and many other blessings besides, particularly his help and so on.

[7 : 52] And the question, of course, is, well, why did God do those things to us, to these Israelites? Why did he do such things? Why did he set them apart as his people? Why did he help them?

Why did he give them the land? And was it because they were the best people? Did God look over the whole of the nations of the world at that time and say, Well, there's this group of Hebrews, these Israelites.

They seem a pretty good bunch. They seem like they've got things on the ball. They're really honoring me and living for me already, so I'll have them because they're the best of the crop.

Or was it because they were deserving? Because they were worthy? Well, clearly we know that it was not the case at all. God did not call them and choose them and set them apart for himself to become his people apart from his great grace.

We see, if we read earlier on in the chapter, that in fact, in spite of being God's special people, in spite of all the blessings he'd given them, they were sinful and idolatrous.

[8 : 53] For when Samuel speaks to them, he says, If you are returning to the Lord. In other words, they had gone away from the Lord. They had lived in disobedience to God.

If you are returning to the Lord, then with all your hearts, get rid of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths. The Ashtoreths were poles that they erected to this goddess and burnt offerings to and worshipped to.

And it's clear that clearly they were doing that because later on, verse 4 tells us, the Israelites did put them away. They're Baals, another god that they, false god, a foreign god, a Canaanite god that they worshipped.

And in fact, they confessed themselves that they are a sinful people. They're in verse 6. On that day, they fasted and they confessed, We have sinned against the Lord. They were a sinful people.

They were not a people who deserved God's grace. They were not a people who deserved his goodness. They were not a people who deserved his rescue in this situation. Everything that they had from God had come because of grace.

[9 : 59] Undeserved favor. And it's important, dear friends, that whenever we come and stop for a moment, that we remember that these things apply to us as well.

We are the us. We are those who have been brought into this church by the Lord our God, not because we deserve to be, not because we are the best of the people of this world, not because we are the most righteous or upright, not because we have done anything to deserve anything from God, but all of his grace.

And it's so important that even at this anniversary time, in one sense, that we stop and acknowledge this painful truth that we are sinful people. Whatever God has done for us in the last year and before that, it's not because we deserved it.

God has not brought me here to be your pastor because you deserve me, and I have not been brought here because I deserve you. Does that make sense? Anyway, it's not because of anything in ourselves.

It's not because of anything that we've done. But we are all those who are undeserving of the help of the Lord. All those who have sinned against the Lord. In one sense, one of the good things to mark at an anniversary is to confess, Lord, we have sinned against you in this past year.

[11 : 16] We haven't got it all right in the past year. We have made mistakes in the past year. We have not lived as we should have lived. Now, we don't do that because, in one sense, God wants us to beat ourselves up.

It's not because he wants us to crush us or to make us miserable or depressed or to say, oh, what a terrible person am I.

He wants us to do that and to see that so that it exalts and elevates his grace to us, so that it elevates his help to us, so that we see him more wonderfully than he is.

In one sense, if we were to say to God or if we were to think, well, God, thank you for loving me, but actually I'm a nice person, and therefore I can understand why you should love me, that doesn't make God's love all that great, does it?

But love to the sinful, love to the unlovely, love to the unpleasant, love to the lawbreaker, love to the enemy. That's what exalts the love of God.

[12 : 18] And so we have to recognize again that we are a failing people. We, in ourselves, are a people who need help. And that's the second thing, isn't it?

Who are the us? Well, then it's then, thus far the Lord has helped us. The Lord has helped us. What has the Lord done? He's given help.

Who needs help? Well, the helpless need help, don't they? The weak need help. The fearful need help. This was the Israelites. They weren't a great band of warriors.

They were a fearful bunch. When the Israelites heard that the Philistines were coming, verse 7, they were afraid of the Philistines. And rightly so, because the Philistines were those who had conquered and overcome their country.

God had given them the land several generations before. He'd given them the land and they'd driven out their enemies by God's power and grace and they'd settled. But God had said to them again and again, if you sin against me, if you reject me, then you can be sure of one thing.

[13 : 20] Your enemies are going to come back and overcome you. And that's exactly what happened. The Philistines came in, beat them in battle, took the Ark of the Covenant, which was the symbol of God's blessing and presence with them, away from them.

It's a wonderful, wonderful story if you get to read it. It's a very humorous story as well, because the Ark of the Covenant, the presence of God, the symbolic presence of God, was taken by the Philistines and put in their temple, the temple to their God.

And his name was Dagon. You can read about it in chapter 5. And they put it in next to Dagon, a statue of their God, Dagon. But when they came in the morning, Dagon had fallen over flat on his face before the Ark.

And so they put him back up again. Next day he'd fallen over again, flat on his face before the Ark. And then God sent them all sorts of plagues, rats and boils. In the end, they got rid of the Ark and they sent it back to God's people.

They were afraid of the Philistines, because their enemy was great. And they had been oppressed by them and overrun by them.

[14 : 24] That's why, of course, when it was told to the Philistines that there was a group of the Hebrews gathering together, they sent an army to subdue them again, thinking they were going to raise an army to overcome them and to free themselves from their bonds.

But they were a fearful people. They were no match for the Philistines. They'd been no match before. They'd been defeated before. They were a weak people. That's why they needed the Lord's help. And in setting up the stone, what Samuel was doing was he was acknowledging their reliance upon the Lord, that everything that happened had been done by God.

They were declaring that this triumph and victory of the Philistines was God's doing and not theirs. We read that, don't we, there in verse 10.

That day the Lord thunder with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed by the Israelites. He broke in.

He did something. He acted. It was his help. Now every one of us, dear friends, has received the help of the Lord. Every single person here has received help from God.

[15 : 32] There is no such thing as a self-made man or a self-made woman. Every one of us has received from God's gracious help. And every moment of our lives and the moment of our conception through to the very safe delivery of us at birth, through our childhood and our youth, through our adulthood, up until this point, we are all recipients of the Lord's help.

We are here by his help. And if it hadn't been for his help, we never would have reached here. We never would have lived this long. But how much more so the Christian?

How so much more those of us who belong to this church and those who have put our faith in Christ Jesus? What help have we received? What help have we received? We were utterly helpless.

Sin robbed us of all power so that Paul is able to say in Romans chapter 5, when we were without power, at the right time, when Christ died for us.

Sin robs and destroys and brings death. We need help. We could not save ourselves. We cannot save ourselves.

[16 : 46] We could not give ourselves repentance and faith. We could not turn away from our sin. We could not raise ourselves from the death of sin. We could do nothing, but God has done it all. It's by his help.

Paul writes to the Ephesians, give thanks to God who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. It's through what Christ has done for us.

He has been the Lord's help. He's the one who came into this world to rescue and to save and to help the helpless. What about this local church coming up to 42 years this year?

How is it possible that this local church is still here? How is it possible that we are still continuing? How is it possible that we have got this far with the Lord's help, by the Lord's help?

That's the only way. It's not because of the great pastors of the past, not because of the great men and women of the church.

[17 : 50] The Lord has done it with his help. Again, notice there that Samuel doesn't say, thus far have we come with the Lord's help.

No, he says, thus far the Lord has helped us. It's all his doing. How we've managed to get through one year. Been touch and go at times.

We've managed to get through one year. How have we done that? How have we managed as a church? How have I managed as a minister? Is it because I, you know I'm being patronizing, because I'm so great, because I'm so spiritual, because I'm so godly, because I, no, it's not.

I can assure you, I can tell you, I can guarantee to you that if the Lord was to withdraw his help from me, then I would just collapse on the floor in a heap. If it was my strength, if it was my power to follow him or to serve him or to serve you, then I would utterly fail.

Absolutely, in an instant. Because I've known a time when the Lord has withdrawn his hand. And he's done it for a purpose, to show me how much I needed his help.

[19 : 01] And I'm sure he's done that for you as well, dear friends, at times. It may even be at this moment in time, I don't know, that some of you feel that you are in need of the Lord's help. It may be for some of you feel that the Lord has withdrawn his help.

You feel that if anyone was to turn and speak to you or say boo to you, you'd fall over, be knocked down with a feather. Could it be, dear friends, that the Lord has brought you to a place where you feel so helpless because he desires to give help?

He wants to help but perhaps you have been struggling and going on in your own strength, trusting in your own resources, trusting in your own power.

It's an easy thing to fall into, isn't it? But the Lord will bring us to that point where we need his help. Let me come to the first of the words in this phrase.

Thus, or first two words, thus far, or as the AV would put it, hitherto, or some other translations up to this point. What does that mean? Thus far has the Lord helped us.

[20 : 10] Well, clearly in one sense it means up until this very point, all the way preceding, all the events preceding, the Lord has helped us. And again, certainly that is not only true in the immediate context of the situation where God helped them in that battle, but all the way through the history of God's people, all the way through to Abraham and before Abraham as well, those who put their faith and trust in him and walked with him, received the help of the Lord.

So throughout history, however many thousands of years before this point of history, God had helped his people. Up to this point, here's a marker in one sense.

And again, we've already recognized and seen that for us, both those who don't know Christ and those who do know Christ, the Lord has helped us up until this point. He has been to us a helper, a sustainer.

But what does it mean? Does it mean that up until this point but no further? Is that what he's saying? Is Samuel sort of saying, well, this is where the Lord's help stops. It stops here. He's helped us to here.

But that's it. Now that's the end of his help. Is that why he's put up the marker stone? No, of course it can't be that. There's some implicit truths that Samuel is declaring in putting this marking stone up.

[21 : 25] Not just what God has done, but something more than that too. I'm sure you've seen those old milestones along the way, along the road, some of the major roads are still there.

There's the new signs but hidden in the hedges are often a marker stone, maybe from a hundred years ago or something even older than that. And usually on those marker stones, those milestones, there's two destinations and two numbers written, isn't there?

There's the place from where you've come and how many miles you've travelled and the place that the road is going to and how much further you've got to go. So if you were walking along the road to Gisborough or driving along, perhaps, I don't know if there is one there, but you'd see a marker stone whip be six, Gisborough 15.

It's not a football score. It's the miles to go. You've come six miles, there's the marker stone but you've got 15 more to go. It's pointing to the future.

It's pointing forward as well as looking back. That's exactly what this marker stone here of Ebenezer is doing as well. It's testifying, yes, to the past.

[22 : 31] And again, that's so important. It's important that we don't live in the past. It's important that we don't keep harking back to the past. That isn't helpful. That isn't healthy. It can be something that we do as we get older, if we're honest.

We talk about the old days, the good old days. But actually, they weren't good old days. They seemed to be good old days, perhaps in reflection to today, but actually they were just the same as today.

It's good to remember the past and give thanks for the past and praise God for the past, but we mustn't live in the past. This marker is a testimony as well to their assurance for the future.

Their assurance for the future. Thus far has the Lord helped us and the implication is and so he will continue to help us from this moment too. If he's helped us up till now, then why should we doubt that he won't help us in the future as well?

The thus far, in one sense, of Samuel's words stretch back through all of history, but they look forward to all that's yet to come. It's almost a statement of faith by God's people in raising that marker.

[23 : 46] It's a statement of faith that God's help will continue on from here to the very end of time. That's why I believe in anniversaries. That's why I think they're important because they are also declaring our faith for the future.

We're saying, with God's help, as God has helped us in the past, so God will help us for the future as long as he sees fit to do so and for as long as we need that help which is all our lives.

I wonder if you've got an Ebenezer, not in the family, but an Ebenezer in your life.

There are significant times, aren't there, in our lives where we can raise Ebenezers. It can be a marriage. It can be the birth of children or grandchildren. It can be retirement. It can be a new job.

It can be a move of house. There can be all sorts of places where we can raise those Ebenezers. Certainly, it should be a birthday. And it's important for us to do that, to raise, as we sang in the hymn, here I raise my Ebenezer.

[24 : 56] Here I make a mark and here I say, thus, Father, the Lord has helped me and has been faithful to me and I thank him for it and I trust him for what's to come. How often did we stop and do that?

When was the last time we stopped and actually mentally said, Lord, I thank you for all the way that you've led me. I thank you for all the help you've given me. I think, unfortunately, if we're honest, it's not very often because we're so caught up with life, aren't we?

We're so caught up with today. We're so caught up with the problems. We're so caught up with the concerns of the week ahead. We're so caught up with ourselves and worrying about where our help will come to deal with the financial problem, where our help will come to deal with work, where our help will come to deal with family issues and concerns and health and elderly relatives and so on.

But, dear friends, if we would stop, if we would stop and raise an Ebenezer, if we would stop and think about and consider, thus, Father, the Lord has helped me and all that he's done for me, if we'd look back and see how he's led us through the winding and the chicanes of life, how he's brought us through the ups and the downs and mountains and the valleys and he's brought us to today, then that would give us great hope, encouragement and peace when we face the tomorrows and we face those difficulties and we're concerned about where our help will come from.

There's that lovely passage in the Psalms, isn't it? I think it's Psalm 121, where does my help come from? I look to the hills, where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

[26 : 35] We look at the hills of life and they seem massive. Of course, they're molehills, aren't they, in reality? But they look to us big because we feel like we're grasshoppers and ants before them.

But they look so big but actually, they're just so small. When we look to the Lord, where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord. And the other question is this, dear friends.

When we set up an Ebenezer, when we stop and still and we look back and look forward, then we're also recognizing still that we are in need of the Lord's help. You see, once we stop recognizing our need of the Lord's help, once we stop trusting Him and asking Him for help, once we stop looking to Him for help, that's when we really are in trouble.

Notice what the Israelites said to Samuel, don't stop crying out to the Lord our God for us. Prayer is that ultimate expression of recognizing our need of God's help.

Prayer is that ultimate humbling of ourselves before God and saying, Lord, we have nothing to bring. We have nothing to, we have no strength in ourselves to sort this problem out.

[27 : 44] We have no power in ourselves to be able to make people be converted or to change this situation or to help that person. We've got no, no strength in ourselves to be able to continue the Christian life unless you help us.

Are we praying in that sort of way? Utterly reliant upon the Lord. Utterly dependent upon His help. And are we doing that not just for ourselves as individuals but for this local church?

Are we praying for one another, dear friends? Paul very often asked for prayer. If you read his letters again and again at the end of his letter he's always saying, please pray for me, pray for us.

And all I can say is echo those words, pray for me. I know you do. I wouldn't have survived this year. Again, except that by God's help given through your prayers.

Pray for one another. Pray for those who you know in this fellowship are struggling. Pray for those who know have got difficult home situations to face. Pray, Lord, for one another that the Lord would help as He has helped them so He'd continue to help them.

[28 : 58] Pray for the church. Pray that the Lord would help us to be the people He wants us to be in Whitby. Pray for us so that as a church we may be faithful to His word.

Pray for us that we might be obedient to His commands. Pray for us as a church so we might be those who hold out the word of life and the gospel to the men and women of this town who so desperately need Him.

Pray. Dependent, reliant. It's great that we have so many things going on in the life of the church, so many fingers into so many opportunities but dear friends, without the Lord's help none of them will accomplish anything.

None of them will bring anyone to salvation. Not one of them will turn one heart from stone to flesh. Only the Lord's help. can do that.

Only the Lord's power can do that. Thus far has the Lord helped us. We are one people dear friends.

[29 : 59] One body, one church. We've been placed together for such a time as this that through us and to us the Lord may give help to the glory of His name.

Let's just take a moment in the quietness of our own hearts and raise that Ebenezer. Let's just take a moment to reflect upon what God has been saying to us and let us respond with prayer to Him.

and let's sing together now as we come to the close of our time this morning.

494 how vast how vast the benefits divine which we in Christ possess. We are redeemed
from sin and shame and called to holiness. It is not for works that we have done.

These all to Him we owe but He of His electing love salvation doth bestow. It means simply this. God has blessed us and saved us by grace and all of His goodness is due to His care and we can trust Him.

[31 : 06] So let's stand and sing 494 494 494 494 494 494 494 494 494 494 494 494 494 504
494 494 505 494 495 505 506 507 507 507 507 507 5013 508 509 50 5017 609 41 59 52
In the name of the Lord, the Lord shall not be strong.

And now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or even imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout every generation, today and forevermore. Amen.