

EBENEZER

1 Samuel 4:1b-8:22

Key Verse: 7:12

"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.'"

Today's passage tells us a part of the story in Israel's history of how the period of the judges ended and how the period of the kings began. During this transitional time, Samuel did his best to help his people seek God as the best way to rescue them from their miseries and desperation. But the people did not listen to him. In this passage mainly we learn from Samuel what kind of spiritual leaders we should be. God told Samuel to satisfy the people's desire to have a king over them. From then on they experienced affliction under human rule, departing from God's gracious care.

I. The glory has departed (4:1b-7:1)

First, the ark of God is captured. (4:1b-22) 4:1b says, "Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines." At that time, the Israelites were politically in a state of anarchy and morally in chaos. They had no idea to fight or conquer. But they had to fight the Philistines unwittingly, as the Philistines were constantly raiding many Israelite settlements. The Philistines were ever

belligerent. The Israelites did not encounter them in Canaan during the initial conquest, but by the time Joshua was an old man, they had been established in five Canaanite cities: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron and Gath. For many generations these people were used by God to chastise the Israelites. (Jdg 3:2,3) They were like a thorn in their side and a snare to their feet. The Philistines fought Israel, defeated them and killed about 4,000 of them on the battlefield. This was the beginning of tragedy.

What happened next? The Israelites decided to bring the ark of the Lord's covenant from Shiloh, thinking that it might save them from the hand of their enemies. (4:3b) The ark of God was made at Sinai. It was used as a depository for the written law (Dt 31:9) and played a significant role during the crossing of the Jordan. (Jos 3:6) Most of all, the ark of God served as the symbol of the divine Presence guiding his people. The time of crisis is the time to seek God and his mercy. Psalm 77:1,2 says, "I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands and my soul refused to be comforted." The time of crisis is the time when faith can grow. James 1:12 says, "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him." But the people of Israel were overcome by fear and they used the ark of God in a superstitious attempt to achieve their own ends. Superstitious people are selfish. They abandon God. They abandon their mission. Finally they become like witch-people or shamanistic believers who shout and yell to get high in dark places. It is tragic that the chosen people became superstitious.

Hiding behind the ark of the Lord, the Israelites shouted loudly until the

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ground shook. When the Philistines learned that the ark of God had come into the camp, they were afraid and said, "These are the gods that struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the desert." (8) The Philistines despaired at the coming of the ark of the Lord into the camp. The Philistines felt they were doomed to be destroyed. Since they thought this was the case, they decided to fight with "do or die" spirit. So the Philistines fought and slaughtered 30,000 foot soldiers of Israel. The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

Second, a despaired woman. When Eli heard the news of Israel's defeat, his two sons' death and the ark's capture, he fell backward from his chair and broke his neck and died, for he was an old man and heavy. The news that shocked Eli most was the ark's capture, because his mission of keeping the ark of the Lord at God's house had failed. Phinehas' wife heard the news that the ark of God had been captured and that her father-in-law and husband had died. It was time for her to pray as Hannah prayed. But she despaired. Then she lost her strength in her hands and feet. In her despair she was overcome by labor pains. When she heard that she was delivering a baby boy, she named him "Ichabod," meaning, "the glory has departed from Israel." In reality God's glory had not departed. But she thought so--in her despair. Here we learn that despair is the disease of death.

Third, two lowing cows brought the ark home. (5:1-6:21) The Philistines thought that they could make use of the ark of God. So they put the ark of God near Dagon, their god. What happened? When the people of Ashdod

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rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! They took Dagon and put him back in his place. (5:3) Then what happened? The following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained. (5:4) Also, the Philistines were afflicted with tumors and rats. They had to get rid of the ark! The Philistines moved the ark to the Philistine city of Gath, then to Ekron. Wherever they put the ark, the Lord's hand of wrath fell on that place. People broke out in tumors and died, and the whole nation panicked. But God showed them that he does not compromise with idol worship. When God comes among sinful, idolatrous people, he brings a curse, not a blessing. Rats had devastated the land and the Philistines were suffering from tumors. The Philistines decided to send the ark home. But how? Their wise men knew how God had struck the Egyptians again and again because of Israel, so they advised the Philistines to send an offering of gold shaped like the tumors and rats that were plaguing them--to honor the God of Israel.

Two calves were penned up and their mothers hitched to a cart carrying the Lord's ark. By natural laws these cows should have returned to their calves. But they did not return. Instead, they shed many tears because they had to leave their children and never see them again. Still, they went straight toward Beth Shemesh and took the ark home. So the Philistines knew that what had happened to them was no accident; it was the hand of the Lord.

II. Return to the Lord (7:2-8:22)

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First, repent of your sins. Look at verse 2. "It was a long time, twenty years in all, that the ark remained at Kiriath Jearim, and all the people of Israel mourned and sought after the Lord." In the past, wherever the ark was, there God was present with his people. The ark contained the tablets of the Law, that is, the Bible. So when the people were with the ark, they remembered the Law of God and felt that they were like trees planted by streams of water. Even though the ark had returned and remained at Kiriath Jearim for 20 years, it was not effective at all to them because they had sinned against God and did not repent. Because of their sins, God did not reveal his glory to them. All the people of Israel mourned because they were distressed due to their spiritual thirst.

At this time Samuel gave the people clear direction. Look at verse 3. "And 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.'" They accepted his words, confessed their sins and repented at Mizpah, for they were fearful and spiritually thirsty.

What did Samuel do next? Look at verses 5,6. "Then Samuel said, 'Assemble all Israel at Mizpah and I will intercede with the Lord for you.' 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." It is easy for

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anyone to comfort people with human sympathy for their miseries. But Samuel did not do so. He directed his people to repent of their sins against God. How did his people respond? Look at verse 6b. "On that day they fasted and there they confessed, 'We have sinned against the Lord.'" These days many people do many things to rescue themselves from their miseries. But if they are told to repent, they are offended instead of repenting. The only way to obtain God's grace is repentance toward God. Jesus came to this world to give joy to the world. But Jesus did not say what people might have expected or wished. Jesus said, "Repent!" Mark 1:15 says, "'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'" Joseph loved his brothers. But he helped them to repent. We must help people spiritually.

Second, Samuel prayed to God for his people. "When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled at Mizpah, the rulers of the Philistines came up to attack them. And 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.'" (7,8) In the past, when the people of Israel were defeated and became fearful of the Philistines, they brought the ark with them. Thus they revealed their faithlessness. After listening to God through his servant Samuel, they repented of their sin of unbelief.

Again they confronted the Philistines' threat. But this time they asked Samuel to pray for them. Repentance helped open their spiritual eyes. Samuel prayed and God answered his prayer. While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt

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offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle. But that day the Lord thundered with 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 Car. (10,11) Here we learn that God cares for those who come to him, repenting of their sins.

Third, Ebenezer. (12-17) Look at verse 12. "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.'" When we study the Bible, we learn three basic truths. The first is, "The God of Jehovah Jireh," meaning, "The Lord will provide." (Ge 22:14) Isaac was a joy to Abraham. Isaac was the one and only son of Abraham. Moreover, Isaac was his heir and future security. But God told him to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. Abraham loved God more than Isaac, God's blessing. Then God provided a ram for a burnt offering to offer instead of Isaac. When we live in this world, our security problem is a nagging problem to each of us. Because of it, people who know that they should love God come to love money more than God. But God's people must have faith that God will provide. Matthew 6:33 says, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

The second is the "God of Immanuel." Joseph is the best example. He was sold by his brothers when he was but a teenager. So he could have sorrowed over himself and died of sorrow in a foreign land. But he believed that God was with him. Joseph believed that God was with him when he was

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seduced by a foxy woman. Then he escaped from sinning against God. Joseph believed that God was with him when he was imprisoned unjustly. So he did not die in anger; rather, he served the other prisoners. Joseph believed that God was with him, so he did not seek revenge against his wicked brothers when he became the Premiere of the Egyptian Empire.

The third is the "God of Ebenezer." There is a story about Reverend Han. He became a Christian by the help of an American missionary. After that he decided to serve God wholeheartedly. He became an orphanage manager. Later, while caring for a teenage T.B. patient, he contracted T.B. and had to have his left lung removed. During the Japanese occupation in Korea, he preached the gospel and was persecuted unbearably. After the liberation he ministered to a refugee church, suffering together and crying with refugees wounded by the communist terrorists. He had to have four worship services on Sunday. But Reverend Han never stopped smiling. He always thanked those who had prayed for him. He never missed thanking his wife. Reverend Han's life key verse is 1 Samuel 7:12: "Thus far has the Lord helped us"--Ebenezer. Likewise, Samuel thanked God for hearing and answering his prayer. Samuel thanked God for helping him and his people in spite of themselves. Samuel thanked God for being with his people. Samuel thanked God, believing that God would lead his people no matter what would happen. In short, Samuel was very thankful to God that up to this point God had led and helped his people. We must not complain and become the prey of Satan. We must always thank God, realizing God's grace.

Fourth, "Give us a king." (8:1-22) Samuel praised God, the God of Ebenezer. But the people of Israel did not praise God for his help. They thought they needed a political system. As a result, they said to Samuel, "Give us a king to lead us." God was the King of his people. To ask for a king was to reject God's rule. The people seemed to have good reasons to ask for a king. Because Israel had no king, the nation was chaotic. (Jdg 21:25) Samuel was getting old, and his sons were corrupt. But their real motive in asking for a king was to imitate the culture of other nations. Some people think they can be better off if their situation or conditions change. But that is not true at all; people are happy when they accept God as the King of their personal lives. Moreover, God's people don't have to be like other people. God's people should be like God's people. (1-5) Samuel was displeased, but he didn't argue; he prayed. God comforted him and told him to warn the people about kings. He did, but they still wanted a king. So God gave them what they wanted. Their sin was that they did not ask what God wanted for them; they asked God for what they wanted. What they wanted was nothing but inviting disaster upon themselves.

May God grant spiritual leadership to each of us as he did to Samuel. We must lead people to God through their repentance. We must learn how to pray to God. Let's not despair or become fatalistic when we confront unbearable hardships, but let's put our faith in the God of Ebenezer and overcome the world.