

# 1 Samuel 7

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Date: 29 December 2013

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Let's play a game of Christmas word association. I'll say a name, and you think of another name or word that first comes to your mind. Okay, are you ready? Mary. Herod. Santa. Ebenezer. Now, that last one, Ebenezer. What was the word or name that came to your mind? I can hear a whisper of Scrooge.

I suspect that for most of you, that was the word or name that came to mind. If it was another word or name, by all means, let me know after the service what other word may have come to your mind when I said Ebenezer. But as I say, I suspect for most, Scrooge was the name that came to mind. Now, that's unfortunate, but understandable. I say unfortunate as the name ought to remind us not of the miserliness and tight-fistedness, but of a generous and loving God. So, in the spirit of the Christmas Carol, which is after all a tale of redemption, let's endeavor to redeem the name Ebenezer. Now, Ebenezer was the name given by the prophet Samuel to a memorial stone that he erected to acknowledge and celebrate to acknowledge and redeeming hand of God in favor of his people.

In verse 12 of chapter 7 of 1 Samuel, we read, Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mishpah and Shem. He named it Ebenezer, saying, Thus far has the Lord helped us. And this seems a very fitting truth to consider as we come to the close of another year. Thus far has the Lord helped us. Is this your experience? Is this your testimony?

Do these words give expression to the sentiments of your heart? Thus far has the Lord helped us.

This morning I want to consider the words of Samuel both in their original context and as words that can helpfully aid us as we consider and give thanks for God's help towards us in 2013.

[ 2 : 4 8 ] Now, Samuel's testimony is clear enough. Thus far has the Lord helped us. But to better appreciate all that lies behind the words, we need to consider four aspects of the help Samuel speaks of.

And the four aspects that we want to think about this morning are as follows. First of all, help needed, help needed, then help sought, then help granted, and finally help acknowledged, which really brings us to our central verse and these words, thus far has the Lord helped us. But these are four aspects of the help that Samuel gives thanks for. Help needed, help sought, help granted, and finally helped, and finally helped acknowledged. But before we look at these aspects, I need to briefly introduce the historical setting. Samuel lived at a critical time of transition in the history of God's people, in the history of Israel. Following the conquest of the Promised Land and the death of Joshua that can be dated roughly to the mid-14th century BC, Israel was led for a period of about 300 years.

Again, the estimate is an approximation, but was led for about 300 years by twelve judges, a far from glorious chapter in Israel's history that's recorded for us, not surprisingly, in the book of Judges. And at the end of the period, or as we come to the end of this period, the people cry out for a king.

And Samuel is the man raised up by God, appointed by God to lead Israel through this transition to monarchy under King Saul, which can be dated roughly to the mid-11th century BC. It's possible, even likely, that Samuel grew up at the time when Samson was judge in Israel. Furthermore, we can assert that it was Samson's death, coupled with the death of the high priest Eli and his two sons, deaths that in all probability were quite close together historically, that propelled Samuel to greater prominence and greater prominence and leadership in Israel. And so that gives us some insight into the period that we are looking at when the events recorded for us in this chapter took place.

But back to Ebenezer and God's help testified to by Samuel. Help needed, help sought, help granted, and help acknowledged. First of all, then, help needed. Why was help needed at all? In what trouble did Israel find herself that required God's help? Well, we can think about this in three ways. We can describe the trouble, explain the trouble, and then notice how the trouble was recognized. So describe, explained, explained, and recognized. First of all, the trouble described that leads to help being needed. What was the trouble? Well, the answer is found in our passage in verse 3. In verse 3, Samuel is addressing the people gathered at Mishpah, 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 then notice what he says,

[ 6 : 52 ] And He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines. He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines. So the trouble that Israel are in, for which help is required, is that they are under the yoke of the yoke of the Philistines. The rule of the Philistines is upon them and oppressing over them. This is the trouble they are in. And if we have our chronology right, this Philistine oppression refers to the period of Philistine oppression spoken of in the book of Judges and in chapter 13.

If you just turn with me very quickly to Judges chapter 13, a chapter that records the birth of Samson and the beginning of his ministry as a judge in Israel, notice how the chapter begins.

We read there in chapter 13 of Judges, Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, so the Lord delivered them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years. And what I would suggest is that the oppression that the Israelites are suffering and that Samuel cries out to God for help because of was this oppression of forty years spoken of there in Judges. And these forty years of Philistine oppression end with the victory, gifted to Israel by God that is described in our passage, and for which Samuel gives thanks.

So this is the trouble that Israel were in. But very much tied in with the trouble described is the trouble explained. That is, why was Israel in such trouble? And the answer is not difficult to find.

In the verse that we read in Judges, we are given the answer. We are given the reason why. Again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, so the Lord delivered them into the hands of the Philistines. Philistine oppression was a painful and a terrible thing. It was a terrible plight, but it was God's means used by God, ordered by God, arranged by God as judgment upon His people. The Philistines were guilty of all that they did and would have to give an account to God for their cruelty and their injustice.

[ 9 : 26 ] But nonetheless, it is clearly stated, and it is clearly the case, that this was God's means to bring judgment upon His people. They did evil in His sight, and He sends the Philistines to judge them.

What was this evil that the people were guilty of? Well, our passage in chapter 7 of 1 Samuel describes it eloquently. What is it that they are called to leave behind? We read in verse 3 of chapter 7 that they are to rid themselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit themselves to the Lord and to serve Him only. The people of Israel, God's chosen and special people, were flirting with foreign gods, were bowing before foreign gods and all the immorality that was associated with these foreign gods.

And so, the trouble that they are in is explained by their own sin and the ensuing judgment of God upon them. Israel's trouble was largely of its own making. So, trouble described and explained, but then we also have trouble acknowledged. The worst kind of trouble to be in is trouble that you don't know about.

It may be blissful to be blissfully unaware, but it is not a healthy place to be, to be in trouble and to not know about it or to not recognize the trouble that you're in. Thankfully, this was not the case with Israel on this occasion. It was often the case, but not on this occasion. Israel did finally recognize her plight. We're told in our passage in verse 2 that all the people of Israel mourned.

All the people of Israel mourned. They had reached a point where, as a nation, there was unanimity in this matter of recognizing the trouble that they were in under the yoke of the Philistines.

[ 11 : 45 ] And so, help was needed because of this great trouble that they were in. Before we move on, let's fast forward to ourselves and to 2013 that is quickly coming to a conclusion.

What about you? Do you need God's help? What troubles have overtaken you in this year that is closing?

Are these troubles? Or might these troubles or some of these troubles have been of your own making? Do you even recognize the trouble that you are in?

And what about us as God's people? What troubles have we faced in 2013 as we look around the nation where God has placed us? And as we see a nation that accelerates in its flight from God, something that is reflected in but not limited to laws being passed or proposed that ride roughshod over God's Word.

As we look at the bigger picture beyond our own borders, 2013 has seen the intensifying persecution of God's people around the world, in North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and we need help. We need God's help.

[ 13 : 14 ] Why all this trouble fought us as God's people? What is the explanation? In the case of Israel, Israel, the explanation is clearly identified by God Himself. They sinned, and they were handed over to God's judgment.

As we try and come to terms and try and understand the trouble that we face, it's more difficult, perhaps, for us to identify the explanation. We need to be more careful as we identify different kinds of trouble, and it's not necessarily the same explanation for all the varied troubles that we face.

But certainly it is a question that we need to pose and consider. Perhaps even more somberly, do we recognize the trouble we're in? Is part of our trouble part of the problem, not that we're so often oblivious to the trouble that we're in. We don't recognize our plight, and we'll never seek help until we recognize the trouble that we're in. So, first of all, the thanks that Samuel gives to God for the help that had been received. It can be considered from this aspect of help needed. But the second thing that I want us to consider here is help sought. It's one thing to need help, and quite another to look for help, and crucially to look in the right place. Israel, thankfully, sought help in the midst of her trouble. I want us to notice four features or four characteristics of the help sought, or perhaps more accurately, of the manner in which help was sought. Four characteristics of the manner in which Israel sought God's help. And let me just mention four words and then think of each of them in turn. First of all, the help that they sought, or the manner in which they sought help, was tardy, was heartfelt, was human, and was mediated. Now, that needs to be explained a little more.

First of all, tardy. This really was a case of better late than never. In verse 2 of our passage in 1 Samuel 7, reference is made to a long time. It was a long time, twenty years in all. And these twenty years, as the verse immediately goes on to explain, refers to the time that the Ark of the Covenant had been housed in Keriath-Herem. And it had been housed in Keriath-Herem following the shameful episode when the Israelites had sought to use the Ark of the Covenant as a lucky charm to defeat the Philistines, Israelites, and as a result had been savagely defeated. And that's recorded for us in the earlier chapters of 1 Samuel. We don't have time to go into that in any great detail. But those of you who remember the account will remember that the Philistines not only defeated the Israelites, but took the Ark hostage, we might say. But seven months later, as a result of the plagues suffered by the Philistines while holding the Ark hostage, they returned it to Israel. And for another twenty long years, the second half of the forty years referred to in Judges chapter 13, the Philistine oppression continued until finally all Israel mourns and seeks God's help. It was indeed tardy their cry for help. Twenty years is a long time to wait. Indeed, we might say forty years, but certainly the twenty years that are referred to here in our passage. And we can only say, what folly, what tragic folly to wait so long. Yes, better late than never, but what folly to wait so long.

And the lesson for us is surely a very evident one. How foolish are we often in waiting, waiting and waiting before we seek God's help, in times of trouble and distress, and yet we wait. And rather than cry out to God for help, to a God who is ready and willing to hear us and to help us, we delay our cry for help, be it because of pride, be it lack of faith, be it sin that we are unwilling to repent of, maybe a whole host of reasons, but what folly to wait so long. The help that they seek, it was tardy, but thank God they did seek it. But I also suggest that another way of describing the help that they seek is that it was heartfelt. Now, we know that in the time of the judges, a period that is coming to a close in the passage that we're considering, a cry for help directed to God was often far from sincere or heartfelt. It was often very utilitarian. There was trouble, there was hardship, well, let's ask God to help, but it was not accompanied by any genuine heartfelt repentance, but not so on this occasion.

[18:50] The cry for help of Israel was heartfelt. It was grounded in a genuine and heartfelt repentance. And Samuel is careful to make sure that this is the case. Notice the language that he uses there from verse 3. And Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, If you are returning to the Lord, notice what he says, 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, and served the Lord only.

And then we notice also how part of that heartfelt repentance involved this public confession of sin. There in verse 6, in the second half of the verse, on that day, they the people fasted, and there they confessed, we have sinned against the Lord.

So, this repentance that is described for us in the passage included both conviction and confession of sin, as we've just noted, and a genuine, heartfelt desire to return to the Lord that went beyond words and sentiments to concrete action. So, the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the Lord only. Samuel was very careful to ensure that this was so. He could see their mourning, he could hear their laments, but he wants to make sure that it's not just and remorse, or the pain of the suffering, that it goes deeper to heartfelt repentance. And he is able to establish that it does, and the people are able to demonstrate that that is so. So, their cry for help, the help that they seek, is heartfelt. And it rather begs the question, or one question that arises is, why now? Why do they cry for help now, or at this point? It might have been the severity of their suffering, or perhaps, and these things don't need to be seen as alternatives. They may well go together.

The very spiritual leadership of Samuel, or the preaching of Samuel, that brought them to this point. What about you? What about us? Is our cry for help heartfelt? Notice Samuel's confidence with the regard to the outcome of such repentance. He will deliver you. It was tardy, it was heartfelt. You can also describe it as human. Why do I describe their cry for help as human? Well, in verses 2 to 6 that we've already read at least twice, we have a picture of what appears to be a perfect repentance, if indeed there is such thing. But certainly all the elements that you would look for in genuine, sincere repentance are found ahead in these verses. And yet, what do we then immediately go on to read in verse 7?

When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled at Mishpah, 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 were afraid.

[ 22 : 26 ] Here are a people who, in a genuine and sincere and heartfelt way, are returning to the Lord. Here are people who have put away their foreign gods, who have left behind their idolatry, who are trusting in God in a renewed way. And all of this, of course, is to be commended and celebrated. And yet, these very same people, when they hear that the Philistines are approaching, they were afraid. Does this take away from the sincerity of their repentance by no means? It simply reminds us that these are real people living in the real world? They're human, just like you and me. A cry for help that is human, that it's real.

But finally, and very importantly, a cry for help that is mediated, as we think of help sought. It was mediated. In what sense was their cry for help to God mediated? Well, what do we read in verses 8 and 9?

They, the people, 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. Then 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. We find Samuel in these verses acting as the people's mediator, interceding for them before God. And what does this involve? Well, Samuel offers a sacrifice, and he prays. And these two go together. The people of sin, as they recognize and confess. And sin can only be atoned for by the shedding of blood, the blood of a sacrificial lamb. And this sacrifice that is offered by Samuel, and its atoning effect opens the door for Samuel's cry to the Lord that is spoken of there in verse 9. And as we ponder on and observe this scene at Mishpah, does it not powerfully and beautifully point forward to Jesus, God's appointed and perfect mediator, the one of whom the apostle

Paul could say in his first letter to Timothy said, for there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. Jesus did not offer a suckling lamb. He was the lamb, and He offered Himself Himself as the sacrifice to which all previous sacrifices pointed and which made all future sacrifices redundant.

He offered Himself as a sacrifice, and He prayed. He prayed as our great High Priest in the Garden of Gethsemane, and He continues to pray on our behalf at the Father's side.

[ 25 : 43 ] What about you? What about us? How many countless times in 2013 have we sought God's help in the only way we can seek God's help? In and through our great High Priest, Jesus Christ. And resting in His finished work, on our behalf. So, help was sought. But moving swiftly on, we also can consider help granted.

And in considering the help granted by God, we can look at three time frames. The present, that is Samuel's present, the past, and the future. First of all, the present, and the present help that was granted by God.

And we have that described for us in verse 9, where we read that the Lord answered Samuel's cry. And then, in what follows, we have a description of how God answered. While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt 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. And then, it continues to describe this great victory that was won. The present, or immediate help, was the defeat of the Philistines in a manner that was nothing short of miraculous.

The Israelites at Mishpah were not preparing for battle. This was a holy convocation to rededicate themselves to God. This was not a call to arms that was being made by Samuel. That was not the intention. That was not the purpose. But as they gathered in such large numbers, this draws the attention of the Philistines. And they wonder, what is going on, all of these Israelites gathering together?

And so, rather than wait for what they might imagine was some attack that was being planned, they take the initiative and make their way with plans to confront and fight the Israelites. But before they even arrive, as they approach the Israelites, God intervenes miraculously and thunders with loud thunder and throws them into the panic that we have read on.

[ 28 : 15 ] So, this was present help afforded, granted by God to Samuel and to the Israelites. What about ourselves in this year that comes to a close? What victories can you identify where God has acted on your behalf in the present in this year that closes? But I think as we consider the help granted, the help afforded, we can also just briefly think about help granted in the past. Now, the passage makes no specific reference to God's help in the past. But what do you think? When Samuel uttered the words, thus far has the Lord helped us, do you imagine that he was only thinking of the victory that he had just witnessed before his very eyes? Now, no doubt that victory was at the forefront of his mind. But as a faithful servant of God, grounded in God's Word and grounded in the history of God's God's Word and grounded in the past. And so, too, with us, we must have looked beyond God's

God's redeeming help on behalf of Israel, going back in history through the Judges to Joshua and Moses, and back even to the call of Abraham in ages past. In his mind's eye, as he declares these words, thus far has the Lord helped us, he rightly gives thanks and acknowledges God's help in ages past.

And so, too, with us. We give thanks, as we ought, for God's help in this year that comes to a close. But we also look back in our own personal life histories and in the history of God's big story that finds, of course, its center on a hill outside Jerusalem and a lamb crucified in our place. And so, with Samuel, we can declare, thus far has the Lord helped us. Help in the present, help in the past.

But Samuel also, in these brief words, speaks of and points to help in the future. Notice the manner in which he expresses himself in describing the stone that he is erecting as a memorial. Thus far has the word of the Lord helped us. And in these words, of course, there's not only a backward glance. There is surely also a forward look. Thus far, these are words that speak of one who looks to the future in trust and expectation. God will continue to help his people. This was Samuel's conviction, and Samuel's trust was of course not misplaced. In verses 13 and 14, we read of how God continued to help his people and to protect his people. Throughout Samuel's lifetime, the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines. And we too can say, thus far has the Lord helped us. We look back in gratitude and thanksgiving, but we also look forward in faith and expectation that the God who thus far has helped us will continue to help us. He will surely help us in 2014, as he has helped us in every year that has passed thus far.

So help needed, help sought, help granted, and finally, help acknowledged. And this is about Samuel saying thank you, but it's more than just saying thank you. Samuel acknowledges God's help in two ways. He does so with a stone, and he does so with a life. First of all, the most obvious way in which he acknowledges God's help, with a stone, a stone of help. Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mishpah and Shem. He named it Ebenezer, saying, thus far has the Lord helped us. This stone was and was intended to be a visible memorial.

[ 32 : 41 ] This is not some private ceremony. But in a very public and visible way, this stone is erected, that it might be seen, that all might see and be reminded of what the stone stands for. A stone to be seen, to be seen by God, the one to whom thanks were being given. God can see our hearts, of course. He knows what is in our hearts, the gratitude that there is or that is absent from our hearts. But it is also right and fitting that we should, in a visible manner, give expression to our thanks to God, and that God Himself should see and hear as we give thanks. But this memorial was not only seen by God, it was seen by God's people. And it was to serve as both a reminder of God's help, and, when necessary, a rebuke in times of ingratitude.

Seen by God, seen by God's people, seen by God's enemies. It would seem that even the location chosen by Samuel that's described for us there, though it's difficult to identify with precision, the location with the information given, but it would seem that even its location served this purpose, that the Philistines, as they looked from beyond their borders, having been chased back into their own land, they would see this memorial. If ever they thought of once again invading Israel, they would see this memorial. And it would be a reminder to those who were willing to listen, don't mess with God's people. Of course, they did endeavor to do so in future times. Indeed, Goliath, of course, comes subsequent to the events that we are describing, or that are being described for us here. A stone as a memorial to acknowledge God's help. What kind of memorials do we have today? It's interesting that most of the memorials we have have been generously given to us by God. We haven't even needed to do what Samuel did and erect a memorial ourselves. A rainbow serves as a memorial for us. The sacraments, maybe very especially the Lord's Supper, serves as a memorial for us to remind us of what God has done for us to assure us of what God will continue to do for us. The Lord's day is itself in many ways a memorial for us.

The psalms that we sing as we are reminded of God's help to his people in ages past serves as a reminder, as a memorial to us. Well, you can perhaps think of others. But I said that Samuel acknowledged God's help in two ways, with a stone and with a life. What life? Well, his own life, Samuel's own life, offered to God in faithful and grateful service. We read in verse 15, Samuel continued as judge over Israel all the days of all the days of all the days of his life. And this too was seen by God, was seen by God's people, and we continue to see and be witnesses of Samuel's faithfulness, and seen also, I'm sure, by God's enemies in certain measure. Well, what about you? What about us? Have you acknowledged God's help?

Have you thanked Him? Have you done so in a visible manner? Has your life been offered to Him as a sacrifice of thanksgiving in this year that is coming to a close? The words that we read there concerning Samuel's service, that it was all the days of his life. We can read them and maybe miss something of the significance of them. The words used, they're revealing and they're challenging, they don't just mean until Samuel died. We might read them in that way, until he died. Of course, that's true. But they really do mean all the days of his life. All the days of his life lived in grateful service to the God who answered his call for help. And may that be true of us as we look forward to the year that is about to dawn, as we look forward to the beginning of 2014, that every day might be lived in grateful service to the Lord of whom we can say with Samuel, Ebenezer, thus far has the Lord helped us. Let us pray. Our God, we come before you this morning and we declare to you that indeed, thus far, you have helped us. We recognize that it is so and we gratefully express our thanksgiving to you for the help that you have given us, way beyond our asking or imagining and certainly deserving.

And we pray that you would help us to acknowledge your help and to give thanks for it, not only with the words that we speak, important though that is, but with Samuel, that we would acknowledge your help with the lives that we live. Forgive us for the many days that have passed in this year that is closing, where we have not served you as we ought. And as we look forward to the start of a new year, we pray that with your help, it would be true of us that we would serve you all the days of our lives, all the days that you graciously give us in the year that is about to begin. And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

[ 38 : 58 ] Let's close our service this morning by singing Psalm 20. On page 24, Psalm 20, and we'll sing the whole of the Psalm to the tune, St. Daniel. May the Lord answer you when you cry in distress. May Jacob's God keep you, whose name you confess. May God send assistance from His holy place and grant you from Zion support by His grace. And reading on through, or singing on through to the end of the Psalm. Psalm 20, we'll sing the whole of the Psalm. We'll sing the whole of the Psalm. We'll stand to sing.

St. Daniel. May the Lord answer you when you cry in distress. May Jacob's God keep you, whose name you confess. May God send assistance from His holy place and grant you from Zion support by His grace.

grace. May God keep in mind every sacrifice made, except on the altar your offer is laid, and may he fulfill the desire of your heart, success to each one of your plans to impart.

With joy we will shout when your victory's won, we'll lift up our banners in those demands alone, and so may the Lord hear your earnest request, and answer your prayers that seem to him best.

Now truly I know that the Lord from above protects his anointed in covenant love.

[ 41 : 37 ] From heaven in his coolness God hears his cry, and saves by the power of his right hand on his hand.

With horses like giants, self-trust for defense, but the name of the Lord is thy strong confidence.

There brought to them each private strength we arise. O Lord, save the King, give and answer our Christ.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always. Amen.