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Tower of Strength

**“The name of the Lord is a strong tower
The righteous runs into it and is safe.”**

—Proverbs 18:10

Here I Raise My Ebenezer —Part One—

In 1 Samuel 7:7–12, we read,

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. 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.” And 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.

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. And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and struck them down as far as below Beth-car.

Then Samuel took a stone and set it between Mizpah and Shen, and named it Ebenezer, saying, “Thus far the Lord has helped us.”

Samuel recorded this victory with a memorial of thanksgiving. Not with an idol to worship, but with a stone called Ebenezer, that is, “stone of help,” to commemorate the fact that at that spot God saved Israel from the Philistines.

There are many things to learn from the sentence Samuel spoke, “Thus far the Lord has helped us.”

“The Lord”

Israel’s relationship with God was the single greatest factor in their victory. In fact, that is a big part of the story that we pick up only if we research the context.

This was not the first time that Israel had faced the same Philistines on the same field of battle! Twenty years prior, in 1 Samuel 4,

Israel went out to meet the Philistines in battle and camped beside Ebenezer while the Philistines camped in Aphek. And the Philistines drew up in battle array to meet Israel. When the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines who killed about four thousand men on the battlefield.

Stymied, the people of Israel got an idea. They called the priests, Hophni and Phinehas, to bring the ark of the covenant out of the tabernacle and onto the battlefield. If God Himself were in the battle, surely they couldn’t lose! But, surprisingly,

The Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and every man fled to his tent, and the slaughter was very great; for there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers. And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died (4:10–11).

All Israel had the wrong idea about their relationship with God. They got to thinking of the ark as a good luck charm, and took their fellowship with God for granted. They shoved God into a box, literally. For some time, they had been involved in big sins like idolatry, immorality, and careless worship (see 2:12, 17, 22, 29). It was so bad

that God came right out and said, “the Lord desired to put [Hophni and Phinehas] to death” (2:25).

When captured, the ark traveled through Philistine territory for a few months, but God defended His own name even without the help of His people (5:1–6:12). Wounded, the Philistines sent the ark back home. Israel mishandled it also, and God struck them (6:13–7:2). But really, the return of the ark doesn’t figure into the victory in chapter 7 at all. The ark never returned to the battlefield—nor did it have to—for God to be present with His people. No, what finally made the difference was the *repentance* of the people under the leadership of Samuel.

Samuel spoke to 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.” So the sons of Israel removed the Baals and the Ashtaroth and served the Lord alone.

Then Samuel said, “Gather all Israel to Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you.” And they gathered at 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 (7:3–6).

It was in the context of this great national gathering that the Philistines saw a soft target and attacked (in the passage we started with). It was because of the faith and repentance of 7:3–6 that God saved them in 7:7–12. If we wish to succeed in anything, we want the Lord God on our side. This has little to do with some token box, and everything to do with devoting our hearts and minds to His service!

“Has Helped Us”

Let us never forget that the arm of flesh is weak, while the Lord is strong. “O Israel, trust in the Lord; He is their help and their shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord” (Psalm 115:9–10). “I will not trust in my bow, nor will my sword save me. But You have saved us from our

adversaries, and You have put to shame those who hate us” (Ps. 44:6–7). Sure, Israel fought with swords; but God thundered from heaven! It would be good for us to memorialize some of the many ways in which God has helped us today, too. But, more on that next week.

“Thus Far”

I read a note of caution here. Some translations read “thus far” the Lord has helped us. Some read “until this point,” and some read “hitherto.” It can be interpreted geographically or temporally (Baldwin, *Tyndale Commentaries*, p. 80). Either way, Samuel recognizes that there are more battles to fight, and beseeches God’s help for those battles as well. One solid win didn’t mean the work was all done and the borders secure. We must praise God for victories of the past, but continue to look to Him for victories to come!

But even more to the point, I think, Samuel recognizes that the next victory was not guaranteed. If the children of Israel remained faithful and sincere, surely God would fight for them in the future. But if the children of Israel returned to their idolatry and wickedness, they would find themselves back in the loser’s column. “Thus far” God had helped them. But every Jericho can be followed by an Ai, if God’s people fall back into sinful ways. The children of Israel could look upon this Ebenezer in contexts of both victory and defeat, and be reminded that God’s help is the real help that they need.

When Christians work hard in faith, God does His part to provide greater numbers, stronger families, and a sense of joy and worth. Let us raise our Ebenezer on God’s powerful victories, and keep relying on Him in the future.

—John Guzzetta

Quote of the Week:

“To be a righteous woman during these winding-up scenes on this earth, before the second coming of our savior, is an especially noble calling. She has been placed here to help, to enrich, to protect, and to guard the home, which is humanity’s basic and most noble institution.”

—Spencer W. Kimball