

Ebenezer  
*New Year's Eve*  
By Rev. James Slopsema

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**Bible Text:** 1 Samuel 7:12  
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For the year end sermon tonight, let's turn to 1 Samuel 7. We'll read the whole chapter, 17 verses, and then turn our attention tonight to verse 12. Verse 12. In the previous chapter, we learn of the ark of the covenant being lost in battle against the Philistines, and then brought by the Philistines to five of their major cities, in each case, the Lord afflicted them with grievous pestilence and disease so they sent the ark back on a cart to Jerusalem. Now we pick up that narrative in verse 1 of chapter 7,

1 And the men of Kirjathjearim came, and fetched up the ark of the LORD, and brought it into the house of Abinadab in the hill, and sanctified Eleazar his son to keep the ark of the LORD. 2 And it came to pass, while the ark abode in Kirjathjearim, that the time was long; for it was twenty years: and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD. 3 And Samuel spake unto all the house of Israel, saying, If ye do return unto the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the strange gods and Ashtaroth from among you, and prepare your hearts unto the LORD, and serve him only: and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines. 4 Then the children of Israel did put away Baalim and Ashtaroth, and served the LORD only. 5 And Samuel said, Gather all Israel to Mizpeh, and I will pray for you unto the LORD. 6 And they gathered together to Mizpeh, 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 children of Israel in Mizpeh. 7 And when the Philistines heard that the children of Israel were gathered together to Mizpeh, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the children of Israel heard it, they were afraid of the Philistines. 8 And the children of Israel said to Samuel, Cease not to cry unto the LORD our God for us, that he will save us out of the hand of the Philistines. 9 And Samuel took a sucking lamb, and offered it for a burnt offering wholly unto the LORD: and Samuel cried unto the LORD for Israel; and the LORD heard him. 10 And as Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel: but the LORD thundered with a great thunder on that day upon the Philistines, and discomfited them; and they were smitten before Israel. 11 And the men of Israel went out of Mizpeh, and pursued

the Philistines, and smote them, until they came under Bethcar. 12 Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer, saying, Hitherto hath the LORD helped us. 13 So the Philistines were subdued, and they came no more into the coast of Israel: and the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. 14 And the cities which the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron even unto Gath; and the coasts thereof did Israel deliver out of the hands of the Philistines. And there was peace between Israel and the Amorites. 15 And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. 16 And he went from year to year in circuit to Bethel, and Gilgal, and Mizpeh, and judged Israel in all those places. 17 And his return was to Ramah; for there was his house; and there he judged Israel; and there he built an altar unto the LORD.

So far we read God's holy inspired word.

Now verse 12,

12 Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer, saying, Hitherto hath the LORD helped us.

Another year is about to come to a close, the year of our Lord 2022. In our congregational prayer, we looked ahead to a greater end than the end of a year, but on the last day of the year, it's also natural to look back on the year gone by, evaluate it, what happened, what must we say, how do we characterize this year. As we do so, we can recollect things good and bad, happy times and sad times. There certainly were happy times this past year, weren't there? Marriages and births and times of good fellowship and spiritual growth, but this past year also had adversity. In the day when Job was afflicted by the hand of God through Satan and his writhing in the ashes, his wife is dismayed and says, "Why don't you just curse God and die," which Satan wanted him to do, and he said, "What, woman, shall we receive good from the hand of the Lord and not evil," bad things. Well, we also received evil from the hand of the Lord this year, haven't we? Some have suffered with sickness and with disease and with pain; COVID-19 and the variants have been a constant threat to us. Some of us lost loved ones this year. Have there been financial struggles and difficulties? What about depression and anxiety?

As a congregation, we've been deeply troubled too, haven't we? This year our denomination lost three ministers, two of them disciplined, and they left. Three churches, three groups left. Three of our churches left a couple of our churches in tatters. And then there's our own pastor who was then placed under discipline for violation of the seventh and sixth and ninth commandment. Yes, the Lord's hand has brought evil also, hasn't he? However God has preserved us by his grace so that we're here tonight worshipping him, safe in his care. Our response to the things of this year, especially the evils of this year, must be what's found in our text, "Ebenezer, hitherto hath the LORD helped us."

After the Lord gave Israel a great victory over the Philistines, Samuel set up a rock between Mizpeh and Shen and called the name of it Ebenezer which means "stone of help." Ebenezer, stone of help. And then he explained the significance of that name, "Hitherto hath the LORD helped us." The stone of help, Ebenezer. That's what we must too also say at the end of this year. Ebenezer, hitherto hath the LORD helped us. I call your attention to this passage under the theme "Ebenezer." We notice, first of all, a great memorial. This stone was set up as a memorial. Secondly, a rich meaning. What does it mean "Hitherto hath the LORD helped us"? Then a wonderful prophecy, this looks ahead to something greater.

In the preceding verses, we read of a great victory that the Lord gave Israel over the Philistines. Over 20 years prior to this, the Philistines had defeated Israel in battle and it was a devastating defeat because Eli's two wicked sons, Hophni and Phineas, brought the ark of the Lord into battle, superstitiously thinking it would give victory and it didn't. God, in his anger, allowed that ark to be captured and taken away from Israel and it was out of their country for some months until the Philistines returned it because the Lord afflicted them. And it ended up in Kirjathjearim in the house of Abinadab. That was 20 years prior to that but that wasn't the end of the Philistine trouble. For 20 long years the Philistines troubled Israel, invading them, sending out segments of their army to steal, to steal their crops, to steal their riches, to steal their children, to rape and to make havoc in the nation of Israel, and this was all the judgment of God upon Israel for her idolatry. She was serving idols, thinking she could have Jehovah God and his protection but also they desired to serve Baal, Ashtaroth, deceiving themselves into thinking that these gods also were valid and these gods were to be preferred because they didn't place the restrictions upon their sinful desires as did Jehovah.

Well, for 20 years they labored under the judgment of Jehovah and we read in verse 2 that they lamented after the Lord, that means they sighed under the burden of the Philistine oppression. And towards the end of that, it also began to dawn on them that they had to turn from their sin and so they lamented over their sin and their idolatry that brought God's judgment upon them, and they sought the help of Jehovah God at last. And the Lord in response sent Samuel, the last of the great judges, and he charged the nation of Israel to return to the Lord their God with all their heart, not half-heartedly, with all their heart and to demonstrate that by putting away the gods that they were serving, Baal and Ashtaroth, and Israel promised to do that. No, let me put it this way: Samuel promised, "When you do that, the Lord will hear your cry and lift the oppression and bring peace and freedom from the Philistine threat."

And Israel did that. They threw their idols away. They cast them down. They destroyed them. And Samuel told them, "Now come together, all of you, representatives of the whole nation. Come to Mizpeh," it was a city in the tribe of Benjamin, "and let's have a day of fasting and let's have a day of confession of sin before the Lord." And that's what they did but when the Philistines heard that the nation, the heads of the nation were gathered together at Mizpeh, thinking that perhaps they were gathering to revolt, the Philistines gathered their large army and marched upon Israel and the Israelites were helpless. And Israel turned to Samuel, "Pray for us, Samuel! Plead for us!" Which

Samuel did and he took a young suckling lamb, offered it as a sacrifice to Israel for their sins and pleaded for Israel and the Lord responded with a tremendous violent thunderstorm which scattered the Philistines, wreaking havoc upon them, and as they fled Israel was able to chase after them and chase them all the way home with a great loss of life to them.

Now according to the passage before us, Samuel, in response, set up a stone between Mizpeh and Shen and called the name of it Ebenezer. Although it's not stated, this stone named Ebenezer took the nature of a memorial. Memorials were commonplace in Israel's history to remind Israel of various events of God's grace to bring salvation to the people. The Passover feast that they were charged to keep every year was a memorial feast. Remember, the first Passover was in Egypt while Israel was still in bondage. The angel of death went over every house and because Israel had been obedient to put the blood of the lamb upon the doorpost and the lintel, the angel of death passed over because that blood was a sign that they were looking for the blood of the Savior, but the angel of death went into the house of every Egyptian and killed the firstborn. And Israel was instructed, "Now as a memorial, you are to celebrate that Passover as you did in Egypt, the blood on the doorpost, inside eating certain things. A memorial so you'll never forget." Then 40 years later when Israel entered into Canaan, they came to the east side of the Jordan River which was swollen a half a mile wide, very swift current, and so the Lord dried up the riverbed, remember? The priest carried the ark into the middle of the river and the waters kept on piling up and piling up. All Israel passed through and then 12 stones were taken out of the riverbed and were placed upon the bank as a memorial to this great work of God to bring the people of Israel miraculously into the land of promise and Joshua said, "Now when your children come and ask what's this pile of stones here for, then you tell them this is to remind us of what happened when we crossed the river Jordan."

Memorials and there were others, and the stone that Samuel set up partakes of the same nature. It was designed to remind Israel of the great victory that he had given to them at Mizpeh. Stone of help. Now that's the first point, that's the short point. The second point is a little longer: the meaning. Ebenezer, stone of help. Samuel indicated to Israel that the name was to remind Israel of the fact that "Hitherto hath the LORD helped us." And that word "hitherto" is very significant and gives a meaning to that name Ebenezer that we might be inclined to overlook. "Hitherto" means "up until this point." All this time up until now the Lord has helped us. If we were with Israel and we were reading this, without this verse we would probably say, "Well, finally, at last. Finally the Lord has helped us. Twenty years we were under the bondage of the Philistines. Finally the Lord has helped us." That's not what it means. "Hitherto" means "all this time." These 20 long sad years when the ark was taken at the defeat, and all these years that we had the ark back but the Philistines oppressed us. All this time the Lord has helped us.

That's what it means and the meaning is not, "Well, things were pretty bad and we lost the ark for awhile, we got it back, the Lord helped us. And yeah, for 20 odd years we were under oppression of the Philistines but somehow the Lord helped us and we survived." That's not what it means. The meaning is this, "The Lord has helped us through this oppression. When the ark was taken by the hand of God, the Lord was

helping us through that. And when the Philistines came year by year to steal and to rape and to take what was ours and to kill, the Lord was helping us." That's what it means.

So this looks beyond the physical victory that Israel had over the Philistines to a deeper and greater spiritual victory that they had at this time in their history, and that was a victory over the power of sin that had taken hold of Israel. Israel had fallen into the sin of idol worship, idol worship with all the sins that came with it. And that was the attraction, by the way, of idolatry. The Lord says don't commit adultery. Adultery and sexual promiscuity was part of the idol worship. People liked it. All the things that the Lord says no to, "Don't do this because that's your sinful nature, that's offensive to me," the idols said, "That's fine. That's fine. And whatever your God Jehovah promised to you, we'll give it to you maybe in a different form." Idolatry involved all sorts of sins and abominations which were offensive to the Lord and unless the nation departed from that sin of idolatry and all the sins that came with it, and unless they found forgiveness from the hand of God, Israel would no longer continue as God's covenant people; the judgment of God would be that in their generations they would die out and God would find somebody else. It was that serious.

So to save his people from their folly, the Lord sent the Philistines to oppress Israel. We must see this oppression on the part of Israel to be the chastening hand of the Lord. And now I want to talk a little bit about chastening because that's important for this passage tonight. Chastening is the work of God's love and mercy for his people, through affliction to bring them to a state of holiness, to bring them and to accomplish in them holiness which he desires through affliction. And there are a number of different ways to look at that in that this chastisement works. Sometimes this chastisement involves affliction to correct the people of God so that they turn from their sins. You know, if we wander away into sin, the Lord comes with his word, "Don't do that. Don't do that. That displeases me. That's the way of destruction. That's the way of judgment. Don't do that. Come back." But if that word is ignored, then the Lord sends affliction.

Often pain and suffering, which is the natural consequence of one's sin and to which one has given himself over, and sometimes, sadly, that's what it takes to bring us, his people, back to him. Chastisement to correct us. But chastisement is also found in other situations. Sometimes it involves God sending suffering to prevent sins that would otherwise arise in a person's life. Take, for example, David who sinned terribly by committing adultery with Bathsheba, another man's wife, and then covering up that sin by murdering her husband. Well, he found forgiveness after Nathan came to him and pointed out his sin and he repented and he was forgiven, but Nathan said, "There's consequences yet, not because the Lord wants to punish you but the sword is never going to depart from your house. You know what you did to Uriah? Well, the sword is never going to depart from your house." To teach David not to take sin lightly again, to remind him all the time, "I can't take sin lightly." Chastisement.

Or take the example of Paul as he explains in 2 Corinthians 12, to prepare him to be an apostle, he was taken up into the third heaven, the body or the soul he's not sure, to see things that is not lawful for him to tell us, but to prepare himself for an apostleship. But

now he said, "So that I don't become too proud," because that was his tendency. The Lord gave him a thorn in the flesh that Satan used to buffet him, trouble him, and he prayed, "Lord, take it away! It's hindering my service." And the Lord says, "No, my grace is reaching you through that and my strength is made perfect in your weakness. I'm keeping you. I'm keeping you from going in a place that otherwise you might be prone to go." Chastisement.

And then there's chastisement in this situation where there's not especially a sin that has been committed and a person has to be corrected nor reminded, "Don't take sin lightly," but is simply simply to bring someone to a higher state of holiness. Job was an example. Job was a man who was blameless before the Lord. He said to Satan, "Do you see my servant Job, how he serves me?" Satan says, "Yeah, but you treat him too well. Let me touch him and he'll curse you and die." So God gave Satan permission and God, through Satan, afflicted Job terribly, lost his children, lost his riches, then his health for what purpose? So that Job would grow in faith. He had nowhere else to turn. He turned to the Lord in faith like never before and he became much stronger in his faith.

I know a woman whose husband left her, ran off with another woman. She was a godly woman in the church, not in our churches. I saw what it meant when Malachi says, "You abandon your wife, you do violence against your wife." I saw what it meant, even though there was no physical abuse, nothing. God used that terrible terrible experience to turn this woman to the Lord more than she ever had before and she became a spiritual giant in her church and in her community.

Chastening. And of course, when the Lord chastens, it's not always just one or the other, sometimes it's a combination but that's the nature of chastening. In whatever form it takes, it's always a manifestation of God's love and mercy. The blessings of God are enjoyed not in the way of sin, they're enjoyed in the way of holiness and so God chastens us. For Israel at this time, God's chastening was to correct her and to bring her to repentance for her sin of idol worship. He had sent the prophets. He had sent Samuel warning them, warning them, and it fell on deaf ears. And so the oppression of the Philistines was brought upon them by the Lord as a rod designed to correct them and free them, free them from the destructive sin of idol worship and that's exactly what it accomplished.

Under the rod of oppression, Israel lamented after the Lord. Samuel says, "Put away your gods. Return to the Lord wholeheartedly. Don't try to turn to the Lord and still keep these idols. Get rid of them." And they did. They came to Mizpeh. They confessed their sins. Samuel offered a burnt offering, looking ahead to the great sacrifice the Lord was going to provide for his people in the coming Savior. They put their trust in that and they put their trust in Jehovah's promise as the Philistines approached and the Lord gave them victory. Yes, victory over the Philistines but the great victory was the victory over the power of sin, victory over the power of idolatry, and to memorialize that, the stone was set up. Ebenezer, stone of help, hitherto has the Lord helped us. He's freed us from the scourge of idolatry.

In this light, we must evaluate the hardships and struggles that we've endured during this past year. The Lord has been helping us through chastisement. We all need the chastening of the Lord. Let no one say, "Well, maybe you do, maybe he does, but I don't need it." Listen to Hebrews 12:6 and 8 and then see once if you want to say that yet. "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers," all the children of God are partakers, "then are ye bastards, and not sons."

All of us as God's adopted, born again sons and daughters need it, and the Lord mercifully supplies it to advance us in holiness, and that's how we must understand the struggles we've gone through this year. What hardships have you had personally, individually or as families? Hit by COVID-19? Has it been more than an inconvenience for you? Is there cancer? Other illnesses that threaten your life or bring chronic pain? Are there financial difficulties? Do you have sons and daughters who are gone away astray, brought grief to your life? I don't know this congregation, I'm not your pastor. What was God's purpose in that? We ought to think about that. Was it to correct you? Do you need correction in a certain part of your life? Was that the purpose? Was it to keep you from sin so that you don't take sin lightly? Or perhaps the Lord knows the weakness you have and says, "I'm going to put this scourge upon you so that you won't go there." Was it simply to try your faith and to increase your faith so that you will be fitted for better service now and in eternity? What is it? We ought to stop and think about those things, pray about them, because the Lord in his mercy has been helping us through those things.

And let's apply this now to our church situation as well. We've had a minor split, in a way. We've lost some pastors, a couple of congregations have been devastated, they had to be reinstated with the approval of Classis East and Classis West. We have friends that have gone to another church and it's disrupted our friendship, family members perhaps. This turned things upside down for us. And our own pastor is under discipline. That's hard for us as a church and it's for the whole denomination. Why has the Lord been doing this? What's the nature of this chastening? Have we been proud and arrogant as a denomination? You know, we do have some strengths, don't we? One of our strengths, our greatest strength is doctrinal purity in spite of what the schism group says, but we can easily become proud and arrogant about that, be very critical, sometimes become unfairly critical of others. Remember what the Lord says more than once throughout scripture? The Lord gives grace to the humble but he brings the proud down low and abases them. Is this what the Lord is doing?

Or is he doing this to prevent us from being proud? You know, we live in a sad situation in west Michigan where a number of churches, of our mother church, the CRC, they simply dried up. They had to close their doors. The young people left. It's easy to gloat over that. We mustn't. We must be saddened. We mustn't lift ourselves up in pride and say, "Well, but we're not that way." Is the Lord doing this kind of thing to us to keep us from that?

Do we have a problem with dead orthodoxy where we are orthodox in our doctrine but it doesn't show itself as much as it ought to in our lives? It's all up here and not enough down here. Is the Lord sending these things to us this year to teach us we mustn't be content just with an orthodoxy that's intellectual? I don't have the answer. I'm not telling you this is what the Lord is seeking to do and the help he's providing, but these are the kinds of things that we've got to consider and we've got to discuss them together and make them a matter of prayer together.

And let none of us despise the chastening of the Lord whether it be individually or as families or as a church or denomination. Going back to Hebrews 12, "ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth." Going to that chapter, to verse 11, "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby." It's not nice to be chastened, is it? It's grievous. Don't despise it. Don't become angry. Don't turn away from it. Embrace it knowing that afterwards it will yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness.

With that attitude and that perspective, we can say of the year 2021, "Ebenezer, hitherto it's not been a nice year, we've gone through many things. Ebenezer, hitherto has the LORD helped us." And now finally the last point: a wonderful prophecy. Israel's great victory over the sin of idolatry memorialized by the stone Ebenezer was not the final victory. It was a great victory. By the grace of God, Israel was delivered from the sin of idol worship and turned back to the Lord to find his blessing, and the Philistine domination was broken. Reading on,

13 So the Philistines were subdued, and they came no more into the coast of Israel: and the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. 14 And the cities which the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron even unto Gath; and the coasts thereof did Israel deliver out of the hands of the Philistines. And there was peace between Israel and the Amorites.

It was broken. They had been delivered from their sin and the hand of chastening was lifted but it was not the final victory. As long as Samuel was judge, and he was the last of the great judges, Israel behaved themselves and then they desired a king to be like the other nations and the Lord warned them. They didn't heed so he gave them Saul, 40 years of disaster going back to idolatry, back to the chastening of the Lord, the Philistines again became a scourge for Israel.

This victory at Mizpeh was not the final victory. It looks ahead, however, to the final victory that God has for his people. In the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, there is coming coming one greater than Samuel and that is Jesus Christ. Samuel brought an offering of a suckling lamb that only pointed ahead to the greater sacrifice Jesus Christ makes as the Lamb of God to forever overcome our sin and to pay the price of our guilt. And the fruit



of that perfect sacrifice is deliverance. Deliverance. Now on the basis of the promise in the Old Testament of the great sacrifice to come, God gave to Israel the ability to turn from idol worship to serve him, to grow in him, to enjoy him. But of course, the work of God's grace wasn't finished then, was it? So they kept on falling back, falling back, falling back and had to be helped out of their sin with chastening.

We're in the two testament era now. Things have changed somewhat because the perfect sacrifice has been accomplished through Christ. We have much more than what the saints did in the Old Testament and, yes, we have forgiveness of sins and, yes, we have, in essence, the deliverance from the sin of idolatry and all the sins that come with it, but the victory is not complete yet, is it, and we're constantly slipping, constantly slipping back, back into idolatry, or we're prone to so that the Lord has to correct us, he has to remind us through affliction that you mustn't take sin lightly. Always.

And so we look ahead to the day of the Lord's final return when all that is of sin in us and around us will be forever destroyed, the work of God's grace in us will be made perfect. We will be in a new creation with all of God's people in perfect holiness. There will be no more chastening, no more affliction. The Lord won't have to help us that way. But when we get there, we will look back as God's perfected redeemed people and we will say, looking back on history and on our lives because that's the final judgment, everything is going to be revealed, that's the purpose of it. We're going to see things in crystal pure light. We're going to say, "Ebenezer, hitherto has the LORD helped us." All these things that happened, he helped us. Through all these afflictions he helped us. They were chastisement designed in his perfect wisdom to bring us here and it was worth it all. It was worth it all.

That's what we've got to look forward to and as part of that, we have to look back on this year 2022 and all that went wrong, all the things that were grievous and hard, and say, "Ebenezer, the LORD has been helping us." Amen.

*Father in heaven, we thank thee for thy word. Lord, thy ways are mysterious, they're beyond things that we could make up. We thank thee, O God, that thou art a God who cares, a God who will discipline us, chastise us, for the sake of our salvation. Now Lord, take this word and seal it upon our hearts. We ask this for Jesus' sake. Amen.*