Thus Far has the Lord Helped Us

1 Samuel 7:2-17

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.” (12)

Ever since we started studying the book of Judges and up to the beginning of today’s passage, we have heard how the Israelites rejected the LORD as their king and God. Do you remember the key verse of the book of Judges? In those days the Israelites had no king; everyone did as he saw fit. (Judges 17:6, 21:25) Especially, they worshipped the Baals and Ashtoreths of the Canaanites. YET despite all the pain and sufferings that the LORD consequently inflicted on them, and after about 430 years, the Israelites never returned to the LORD. Their unbelief and sin persisted also in the first 6 chapters of the book of Samuel. Yet, despite the LORD allowing the Philistines to slaughter thirty thousand Israelite foot soldiers ………. and despite the LORD putting 70 men from Beth Shemesh to death for looking into the ark of God …… Do you remember what they did after the ark returned from the Philistines? They did absolutely nothing. They simply left the ark of God with Eleazar at Kiriath Jearim and then continued living as they did for the last 430 years. They had no sense of guilt for their sin. They also had no longing for the LORD their God. Indeed, after all this time and after all that the LORD did to discipline His people, it seemed as if they would never ever repent of their sin and return to the LORD.

Look at verse 2. Twenty years had since passed, and all the people of Israel mourned and sought after the LORD. But hold on a minute. Are these the same Israelites? Twenty years earlier, they had no respect for the LORD. They had no sense of guilt before the LORD. In fact, they were not really interested in the LORD. Yet, here they were; all of a sudden mourning and seeking after the LORD. What happened? What brought about this drastic change of attitude towards the LORD?

It came in response to the word of the LORD that Samuel preached to the Israelites. Do you remember how in chapter 3 the LORD raised Samuel as a prophet of the LORD? (3:20) The LORD did so in Shiloh where he revealed Himself to Samuel through His word. (3:21) Then for the next 20 years while Samuel went on circuits through Israel (4:16), he preached the word of the LORD to all Israel (4:1). And their response to the word of the LORD was to mourn and seek after the LORD. This is amazing, isn’t it? Four hundred and thirty years of prior political oppression, sufferings and poverty could not move the faithless hearts of the Israelites even one inch closer to the LORD. Yet, when Samuel preached the clear and powerful words of the LORD, it cut so deeply between their souls and spirits (Heb 4:12), that it revived their faithless hearts. It opened their spiritual eyes to see their sinful selves before the Holy God; to the point where they could not but mourn before the LORD and seek after Him. **Here we can see that only the word of God has the power to move a sinner’s heart in this way.**

The question is: why did the LORD move the Israelite’s hearts in this way? Look at verse 3. .“*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.* The LORD moved the Israelites’ hearts with His word to help them return to Him with all [their] hearts. **For the last 450 years the Israelites gave their hearts to the Baals and Ashtoreths. But as we learned last week, the LORD is a Holy God. He does not share anything, especially the hearts of His people, with other gods. Instead, He wants all our hearts. Meaning, He wants our full attention, devotion and commitment to the exclusion of anything or anyone that may steal our hearts away from Him.** That is why the LORD commanded them: rid yourself of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths. This required the Israelites to take firm and decisive action. They had to practically take the Baals and Ashtoreths they worshipped, and physically remove them from their homes and business. Either by smashing the lifeless statutes to pieces or by throwing it in the fire or the river or the trashcan. Regardless of how they did, the LORD required the Israelites to take action and remove these idols from their lives. Because the Israelites prostituted themselves to these gods for such a long time, they became snares and temptations for Israel. Now it was time to break that chain of snare. It was time to newly commit themselves to the LORD and to turn to their God **with all their heart!** And the way to do so was to practically rid themselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths

**Like the Israelites you and I are also guilty of giving our hearts to Baals and Asthoreths. Now some of you may say, “but shepherd, I do not have a Baal or Ashtoreth statue anywhere in my house. What do you mean?” But here we must know that the Baals and Ashtoreths represent anything that causes us to sin against the LORD. I remember about 12 years ago when I just joined the UBF ministry, the word of God convicted me to delete many worldly videos and songs I accumulated over the years. They were my Baals and Ashtoreths that filled my mind with ideas and my heart with desires that was contrary to what I started to learn in the bible. So I deleted all of the movies and got rid of all the songs. I also threw away many worldly magazines and stop looking at naked or half naked girls on the internet. I even stopped smoking. For so many years I indulged in these things, because it gratified my sinful desires. Yet, when the word of God came to my heart I knew I had to take action. And with God’s help, I rid myself of the Baals and Ashtoreths in my life. It was the first but definitely not the last time.**

**The truth is, in our sinful nature we commit ourselves to many things and relationships in the world. Because, they provide us with temporary hope for a better future, or material success, or simply pleasure and comfort. But in committing ourselves to them we fail to commit ourselves to the LORD. We start to compromise His word. And instead of serving the LORD only, we end up serving the Baals and Ashtoreths in ourselves. That is why we too, just like the Israelites, must rid ourselves of anything or anyone or any idea that prevents us from obeying the LORD with all our hearts. This requires decisive action!**

Then how did the Israelites respond to the LORD’s word? Look at v**erse 4.** The Israelites did exactly what Samuel told them. They took decisive action and put away their Baals and Ashtoreths. They then commit themselves to the LORD and served Him only. Wow! What an amazing work of God among the Israelites. At this point, I cannot blame anyone for thinking that now the Israelites had returned to the LORD with all their hearts. Just look how decisively they acted. But interestingly the passage continues in 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.” Here we can see that returning to the LORD with all our hearts goes beyond mere feelings of remorse or longing for the LORD. It also goes beyond practically and decisively taking action to rid oneself from Baals and Ashtoreths. It also goes beyond committing oneself to the LORD only. Returning to the LORD with all our hearts also requires prayerful confession of sin and by faith receiving God’s forgiveness for our sins personally. This is why, AFTER the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashteroths, Samuel summoned them to Mizpah. While Samuel was praying to the LORD for them, the Israelites drew water and poured it out before the LORD, as an expression of pouring their souls out before the LORD. On that day they also fasted and …for the first time in 450 years confessed that they had sinned against the LORD.”

However, look at verse 7. At this crucial moment, 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. The last time when Israel was in this desperate kind of situation, they were still serving foreign gods. That is why they said, “*Let’s get the Ark of the Covenant and take it into battle. Then we can’t lose*!” (4:2-3) But now, after returning to the LORD with all their hearts - they acted completely different? Look at verse 8. 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.” When we consider the Israelites’ behaviour in the preceding chapters; it is very hard to belief that these were the very same Israelites. Yet, their transformation vividly illustrates the fruit of real and sincere repentance. The truth is, through sincere repentance, the LORD fundamentally changed their hearts. He transformed their inmost being; so that they thought differently, talked differently and behaved very differently. **All in a way that pleased the LORD.** Surely, if the Israelites had attacked them prior to gathering in Mizpah, the Israelites would have run away or again reverted to their old ways of relaying on their foreign gods to save them. Yet, because they tasted the goodness and power of the LORD at Mizpah, they did not run away or rely on idols. Instead, in faith they urged Samuel, “Do **not stop crying out to the LORD our God** for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines. **It is impossible to fake this kind of transformation. Only those who truly repented can behave differently in the face of similar circumstances.**

Look at verse 9. At this critical moment, Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. By faith in the blood of the lamb, Samuel then **cried out to the LORD on Israel’s behalf**; for God to forgive their sins, to accept His people and once again be their God. Not on the basis of anything that he or the Israelites had done. But purely by faith in the innocent lamb’s blood that was shed on their behalf.

Look at verse 10. While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle. But that day, the day they poured out the hearts to the LORD, the day they confessed their sins and the put their faith in the blood of the lamb….On THAT day **the LORD** did something amazing! He **thundered with loud thunder** against the Philistines. (Did anyone of you recently hear the loud thunder striking while raining? One strike is quite terrifying.) Yet the LORD repeatedly thundered against the Philistines and **threw them into such a panic that the Israelites defeated them**. What an emphatic and powerful way for the LORD to answer Samuel’s prayer. Just as the Israelites practically rid themselves from the Baals and the Ashteroths, so the LORD practically answered their prayer with loud thunder.

Look at verse 11.The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth Car. In fact, according to verse 13, the victory over the Philistines was so comprehensive, that they were subdued and did not invade Israelite territory again. What a complete turnaround of fortunes! It was the same Israelites fighting against the same superior Philistines. But unlike the previous battle in chapter 4, this time the Israelites were victorious. Then what was the difference? **Simply speaking, unlike before, this time the LORD powerfully fought for the Israelites. Because they sincerely repented of their sins and truly returned to Him with all their hearts**.

Look at verse 12. Can we please read today’s key verse together? 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.” Considering how broken the Israelites were during the time of the Judges and how they suffered even in the first 6 chapters of **Samuel, the events in chapter 7 was indeed a massive turning point in the history of Israel.** In this chapter, the LORD helped the Israelites to sincerely repent of their sin and return to Him with all their hearts. Then the LORD emphatically rescued them out of the hands of the Philistines. This was such a significant and special turning point in Israel that Samuel wanted the Israelites to never forget it. So he took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. This stone was to be a reminder of how the LORD had helped them. Every time an Israelite saw that stone, that person had to proclaim; Ebenezer. “Thus far has the LORD helped us.” But why was this important? Because, it would prevent the Israelites from backsliding to their old ways. To instead, stand firm in their repentance and grow in their commitment and love for the LORD.

Look again at verse 12. Samuel said: “Thus far has the LORD helped us.” The phrase **“Thus far…..” implies that the LORD helped them only up to a point. But there were still many other enemies to conquer and larger areas of land to conquer. Therefore, when the times came for the next battle or the next challenge, the Israelites had to say: Ebenezer,** “Thus far has the LORD helped us.” By remembering how the LORD helped them before, would strengthen their faith that He would do it again. And therefore spur the Israelites on to remain sincerely faithful and committed to the LORD. This is exactly what the Israelites did under the leadership of Samuel. Then 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. There was even peace between Israel and the Amorites.

In Conclusion: If you and I think carefully back at how the LORD has also worked in our own lives, we will soon realize that the LORD also helped us so much in our lives. Just consider for a moment when was the turning point in your own life? When did the word of the LORD came to your heart for the first time. It was from the LORD. When did you once get rid of your Baal and Ashtoreth? It was from the LORD. When did you once sincerely pour your heart out before the LORD and confessed your sin? It was all with the help of the LORD. Lastly, when did the LORD once answer your urgent prayer topic? Surely, the LORD helped all of us at one point or another. Yet, we so easily fall into unbelief. We backslide, entertain Baals and Ashtoreths, and plot through life as if the LORD never helped us. This is because we do not have an Ebenezer set up in our hearts that will always help us to remember “thus far has the LORD helped me.” We all need to firmly set up an Ebenezer in our hearts, that will serve not only as a reminder but as an encouragement in times of trouble or challenge. Encouragement that the LORD has helped us before and will definitely help us again. This will surely strengthen our faith and enable us to overcome one challenge after another; each time with God’s help. Today, let our hearts not be troubled. Instead, let us return to the LORD with all our hearts like the Israelites. Then, let us set up an Ebenezer in our hearts – so we can always testify “Thus far the LORD has helped me!”