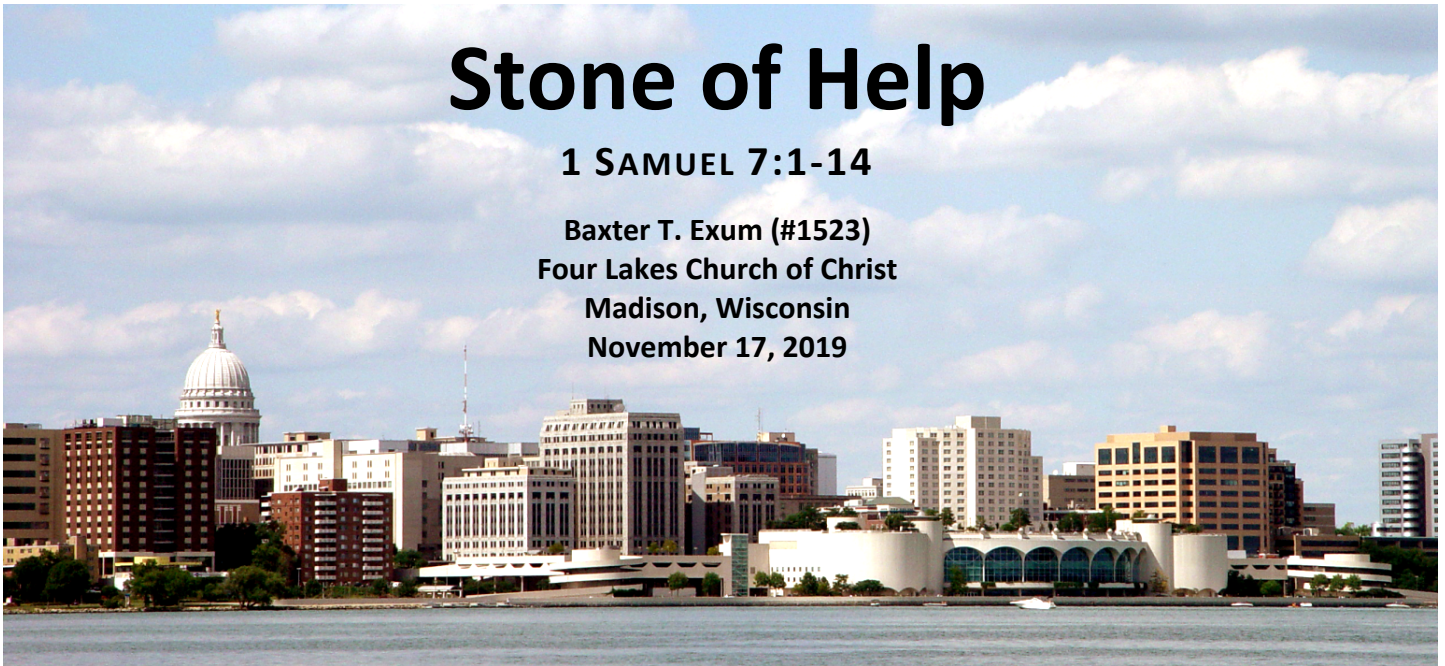


Stone of Help

1 SAMUEL 7:1-14

**Baxter T. Exum (#1523)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
November 17, 2019**



This morning we are looking at a passage of scripture that we have actually covered twice over the past 19 years – once in November 2000 and again in August 2007. It’s an important passage, though, and it actually explains a rather strange line in a song that we sing quite often. In fact, I think we just sang it a week or two ago on a Wednesday evening. But as I looked at the first time we covered this here (on November 5, 2000), I noticed a handwritten note at the top of the sermon. In my comments before the lesson, I mentioned that we had had an ultrasound the previous week and that we learned that we would be having a girl! I mentioned that I was looking forward to spoiling this one, I mentioned that I was imagining that it would be more difficult for me to discipline a girl, and I mentioned that we had already gone out to purchase a velvet and lace dress with stockings! So, I just got a kick out of that this week, realizing that this little girl that would be born a month and a half later, will now be coming home this Friday, on her very first Thanksgiving break from college. I mention this as something of a reminder that we have looked at this passage before, but it has been a while!

The passage actually refers to a stone monument set up by the prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel 7 (p. 446). Last week, we looked at the Ten Commandments in our Sunday morning adult class, and we learned that the Jewish people were not to make any graven images, and the reason was: They were not to even come close to worshiping any idols. Well, whenever they wanted to remember something, their custom was to simply make a pile of stones. We see this when they cross over the Jordan River for the first time. Joshua takes those stones and makes a pile – one stone for each of the twelve tribes. And the stones were to serve as a reminder. As people passed by, they would see this unusual rock formation, and they would remember what God had done, and they would teach their children so that the lesson would continue down through the generations.

Today, we also stack rocks, and it is an ancient tradition. We refer to these as CAIRNS, and they are normally used to mark trails in the wilderness. In more civilized areas, we use printed signs, or we paint blazes on trees – white for the Appalachian Trail, blue for the Superior Hiking Trail, yellow for the Ice Age Trail (that passes right near Madison), but in more remote areas where we might not even have trees, we may see a stack of rocks. And the idea is, as we hike in some remote area, a stack of rocks has a way of catching the eye. As we look around, this is obviously man-made. Their eye is drawn to it, and we realize: This is the direction we need to go. Somebody has been here before. There’s been a huge debate in the hiking world over the past few years. With the popularity of social media, people will hike out into the middle of nowhere, and to make a good picture, they will often stack rocks! They’ve seen this done, so they do it themselves. In a sense, we think: No big deal!

But the concern is: 1.) Especially in streams and riverbeds, a lot of endangered critters make their homes under rocks for a reason – so they don’t get disturbed! And now we have thousands of people digging up rocks and piling them up! 2.) When cairns are used for navigation, imagine now going out into the wilderness, and we now have thousands of these piles of rocks scattered randomly through the wilderness for no reason at all! Where is the trail? I have no idea! Somebody got a great shot for Instagram, but now I don’t know where the trail is. I mention this just to let you know that cairns are something of a touchy subject in the hiking world right now. The National Park Service actually had to go public at Zion National Park a year or so ago, because there were so many unauthorized cairns. They had to warn people to knock it off. We put a good article about this on the church’s Facebook page yesterday afternoon.

But in our text, the prophet Samuel raises a single large stone as a memorial. He refers to it as “EBENEZER,” and he uses a Hebrew word referring to a “stone of help.” At this point, some of you might be making the connection to the song we plan on singing after today’s lesson, #500, “O Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” a song written by Robert Robinson in 1758. In the second verse, we sing the line, “Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by Thy help I’ve come.” There’s been some controversy about this in recent years, as some hymnals have either wiped out that line altogether, or they have changed it. After all, nobody knows what an Ebenezer is. And if we’ve heard that word, we probably associate it with what? Ebenezer Scrooge! So, on one hand, we might just wipe out this reference or change it in some way (we dumb it down), but here’s the other possibility: We do some research! We go back to the Scriptures, and we learn what this reference is all about! We learn what the author intended. And that is what we hope to do, once again, this morning. In 1 Corinthians 14, the apostle Paul explains that we are to sing with the spirit, and we are to sing with the understanding. And that is what we plan on doing.

I hope you are in 1 Samuel 7 by now, but before we read the passage, we need to understand where we are. We’re in the last few years of the judges. The people cross over into the Promised Land with Joshua, they settle the land, and then they start drifting spiritually. They leave God, they worship idols, God allows them to suffer the consequences, they cry out to God for help, God sends a deliverer of some kind, things go well for a while, and then the cycle repeats itself – over and over again. And that’s where we are in 1 Samuel. Earlier in this book, we have Eli the well-meaning but spiritually wimpy priest who refuses to discipline his own sons, who are also serving as priests. Eli’s sons, Hophni and Phineas, are basically stealing from God, they are taking advantage of the young women who serve in the temple, and God is allowing the nation to get harassed by the Philistines. And it’s not going well for Israel. They are losing to the Philistines. The Philistines are making constant raids into Israel to take their crops, and so on. In one battle alone, they lose 4,000 men, and in a desperate attempt to stop this, Eli’s sons decide to send the Ark of the Covenant into battle, almost as something of a good luck charm, thinking, “Surely we can’t lose!” But, they do lose! They lose another 30,000 men! The Ark of God is captured in battle, and Hophni and Phineas are killed. A messenger delivers the news to Eli, who immediately falls off his bench, breaks his neck, and dies (because he was old and fat, the Bible says). When Eli’s daughter-in-law finds out that her husband has died, she gives birth and names the child Ichabod, meaning, “The Glory of the Lord has Departed.” The Ark has been taken. Well, over the next chapter or two, the Philistines don’t know what to do with the Ark. Terrible things start happening. Long story short: They send it back. But, the Israelites haven’t really repented yet, they don’t really know what to do, so they assign somebody to watch it, and the Ark just sits there for a period of twenty years. The Ark is back, but God isn’t back yet. This is where we pick up with 1 Samuel 7:1-14,

¹ And the men of Kiriath-jearim came and took the ark of the Lord and brought it into the house of Abinadab on the hill, and consecrated Eleazar his son to keep the ark of the Lord. ² From the

day that the ark remained at Kiriath-jearim, the time was long, for it was twenty years; and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord.

³ Then Samuel spoke to all 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." ⁴ So the sons of Israel removed the Baals and the Ashtaroth and served the Lord alone. ⁵ Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel to Mizpah and I will pray to the Lord for you." ⁶ They gathered to 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 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. ⁸ 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." ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ The men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and struck them down as far as below Beth-car.

¹² Then Samuel took a stone and set it between Mizpah and Shen, and named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the Lord has helped us." ¹³ So the Philistines were subdued and they did not come anymore within the border of Israel. And the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. ¹⁴ The cities which the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron even to Gath; and Israel delivered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. So there was peace between Israel and the Amorites.

- I. As we study what happens here, I'd like to divide our thoughts into four stages, and we start with the reminder (in the first two verses) that the Israelites find themselves in A DESPERATE SITUATION.

And I know we've already summarized what's gone on to get them to this point, but I would emphasize (based on what we find in the first two verses here) that the people are worn out spiritually – defeat, after defeat, after defeat, followed by twenty years of mourning or lamenting. *"The time was long,"* as Samuel puts it. And as we look back at the last few chapters, if I have added correctly, they have lost at least 34,000 people in various battles, and they've lost another 50,000+ when the men of a particular tribe decided to look into the Ark of the Covenant when it came back to Israel. These losses far outdo the number of soldiers we as a nation lost in Viet Nam. This was a significant national tragedy, with more than 84,000 people dying at the beginning of this 20-year period. And we find in verse 2, that they spent this time *"lamenting."* They were sad. And yet, as far as we can tell from the first two verses, they still refused to repent. They were sad, but they failed to do anything about it. They were sad, but they continued to worship these foreign gods. They were sad, but they failed to change the behavior that made God mad in the first place. We might compare it to a husband who gets in trouble for having an affair, his wife kicks him out because his adultery, he wants to come back, he misses her,

but he continues fooling around with other women. She has no obligation to take him back. There's sorrow, but there's no change.

We are thankful, though, for the sorrow, because change often starts with regret. Repentance often starts with humility. We think about A.A. and the various 12 step programs. The first step is, "We admit that we are powerless over alcohol (or whatever it is), that our lives have become unmanageable." This is what these people, I believe, are realizing in the first two verses. They know they have a problem. They realize that something is wrong. They realize that their relationship with God is broken. They realize that something is missing. And this continues for twenty years. But again, there is value to spiritual pain. C.S. Lewis once wrote that, "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. [Pain] is His megaphone to [wake up] a deaf world." God was using their loss to get their attention. One author has said that, "Humbling misery had accomplished what bountiful blessing could not." The nation was broken, and they were starting to realize it. And thankfully, Samuel is still there, patiently waiting to bring the word of God into their situation. And that's what leads us to the next big idea as Samuel explains what needs to happen...

II. ...because (in verses 3-6), we have the people TURNING TO GOD.

And we notice (in verse 3) how Samuel presents them with a choice, ***"If you return to the Lord with all your heart...."*** He puts it on them. They need to make the decision. And if they choose to return, he does what any preacher needs to do: He tells them what God requires. This is what you must do, you must, ***"...remove the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your hearts to the Lord and serve Him alone."*** He makes it clear. To return to God, you must do this. Up to this point, the Israelites had pretty much been making things up as they went along, a buffet style religion. Samuel, though, informs them clearly: No more! To return to God, you need to make a clear break from the world around you. Put away these other gods. You cannot serve God and Baal.

And I would point out: Weeping doesn't do it! These people had been lamenting before the Lord for twenty years, and they were not okay. There is a difference between sorrow and repentance. We can be sad about sin. We can be overwhelmed with guilt over being distant from God, but sorrow is not repentance. Instead, sorrow will hopefully lead to repentance, and that is what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 7:10, ***"For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death."*** Some sorrow just makes us miserable, but there is a sorrow that leads to change, and that's what we see here in 1 Samuel 7. Samuel tells them what they need to do, and they do it. They make a break. In verse 4, the people physically remove the idols from their homes, and they start serving the Lord alone. We don't like to think of ourselves as idol-worshipers, and yet it is so easy to let other stuff slip into first place in our lives – work, sports, friends, food, even our own children, any number of things. These people, though, make a change – from what is temporary and worldly to what is truly important. I would ask just briefly: What have we done this week that will matter in eternity? What have we done over the past week that has demonstrated our repentance? And then: How will this coming week be different? How do we plan on proving to God that he comes first? We all need to answer this on our own.

But after this change, the people then come together for prayer, they draw water, and they pour out that water before the Lord as some kind of sacrifice. I don't think we've seen this in scripture yet, but the pouring of water seems to be some kind of symbolic act, demonstrating to God that their repentance is permanent. I was talking to somebody last week about our water bills here in Madison. You can log on the Madison Water Utility website and track your usage on a daily basis. You can graph it. And I noticed something on ours. I don't remember the

exact figures, but it was consistent in terms of the gallons used every day: 20, 20, 20, 20, 20, 80, and so on. The jump to 80 is basically laundry day every Saturday! But we usually don't appreciate the blessing of unlimited clean water until we lose it or until we go camping or hiking and need to haul it with us. I've learned while camping that I can get a pretty good shower with 1.2 gallons! One gallon doesn't do it, but 1.2 is the minimum. And I appreciate that 1.2 when I have to go get it, and carry it, and heat it over a fire. My mom was telling me about growing up with six siblings. Every Saturday night, they would draw some water, heating some of it over the fire, and everybody in the family would take a bath in that washtub, starting with the youngest and ending mom and dad at the end. As the oldest in our family, I don't think I like that idea! But water is a valuable resource. And here, the people gather water, and then they pour it out before the Lord. Water is valuable. And we aren't told exactly why they do this, but again, I am assuming they are making a public statement about their change being permanent. After one of our 80-gallon days, I can't call the mayor's office and demand a refund! No, that water is gone! There's no getting it back. And in the same way, their repentance was to be permanent. It was a one-way trip. Some have suggested that the pouring out of the water was symbolic of their tears.

They also fast; they abstain from food. And speaking of repentance, I don't want us to miss what happens in the last half of verse 6. As they fast, they say (in verse 6), ***"We have sinned against the Lord."*** And then the text tells us that, ***"...Samuel judged the sons of Israel at Mizpah."*** So, they confess their sins, and then it seems that Samuel helps them sort this stuff out. In my own mind, I picture the people lining up and coming to Samuel, "This is what we've done against God. How do we fix it?" And Samuel ***"judges"*** the people. He tells them what repentance looks like. We think about John the Baptist and what he said to the soldiers. We think about Jesus and what he said to the Rich Young Ruler. This is what the word says, and this is what you need to do about it. But the point is: The people are serious about this change they're making. And I say they're serious because of what happens next. In the next few verses, as they are assembled for worship, the Philistines show up. The Israelites are scared, but notice how they react this time. They come to Samuel, and (in verse 8), they say to Samuel, ***"Do not cease to cry out to the Lord our God for us, that He may save us from the hand of the Philistines."*** Samuel offers a young lamb as a sacrifice, and that leads us to what happens next...

III. ...as we come to GOD'S RESPONSE.

The Israelites are completely unprepared and unprotected. They have gathered near the border for the purpose of worship, and they have actually come together at the same place of their previous defeat, twenty years earlier! So, they've proven they can lose here! However, as the Philistines attack, God responds with thunder, and the thunder is so intense that the Philistines are completely confused, and they are ***"routed before Israel"*** (verse 10). The Israelites then chase them down. What amazes me is that battle-hardened soldiers who had been living, training, and fighting in the outdoors are so terrified of the thunder that they scatter in all directions. We might understand when our kids are scared of thunder, or when our dogs are scared of thunder, but these are soldiers. And not only that, but Baal was supposedly the god of storms. I saw a statue of Baal at the Oriental Institute down in Chicago last month, and Baal was depicted with his hand up, as if throwing a lightning bolt. But Baal doesn't actually control the thunder, does he? God does this; an act of grace as he fulfills the prophecy made by Samuel back in verse 3, the promise that if the people would return to the Lord, God would deliver them from the hand of the Philistines. And this is exactly what happens. By the way, as we sing the song in just a moment, let's notice the emphasis on grace. Some might think that the God of the Old Testament was a God of wrath and the God of the New Testament suddenly becomes a God of grace, but that is not the case. This is one of the most grace-filled passages anywhere in scripture.

IV. And this leads us to the MEMORIAL.

In verse 12, Samuel takes a stone, puts it at the battle site, and he names it Ebenezer, saying, ***“Thus far the Lord has helped us.”*** The stone, then, was something of a marker. It represented a new beginning, a fresh start. I need to admit something pretty embarrassing this morning. Several months ago, I noticed on Facebook that people were saying “Happy Birthday” to a fairly new member of the family, and I said to Keola, “Oh no! I think we’ve missed his birthday!” We didn’t bother to look it up, so we sent an Amazon gift card. Well, as the day progressed, it started to become clear that this wasn’t his actual birthday; no, this was his sober anniversary with Narcotics Anonymous. We had a good laugh, but how embarrassing – I’m guessing for him, but also for us! I mention this now, because lifting up this “stone of help” was something of a marker, a monument, a reminder that they were starting over. This was their spiritual birthday, a new beginning. Earlier, I mentioned AA. I’ve only been to a few open meetings with various friends through the years, but most of us know how important it is to celebrate progress – 24 hours of sobriety (that’s huge), 30 days, and then monthly, up to a year, and beyond. One day at a time. We celebrate progress. We don’t focus on the wasted years, but we celebrate the change. We celebrate the Lord’s help. And that’s what’s happening here. Samuel raises this stone as a memorial, as a reminder, ***“Thus far the Lord has helped us.”***

And that’s what we’re singing when we sing the song, “Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither [or ***“thus far”***] by Thy help I’ve come.” God has been good to us. God has brought us to this point. God has freed us from sin. God has helped us through times of deep grief. God has perhaps saved us physically in some way, perhaps from illness or injury. He’s rescued us from addiction. He’s brought us through times of unfaithfulness. He’s rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of light. And so, we raise our Ebenezer, in a sense, as we remember God’s help.

We might also think of the Lord’s Supper as our memorial, as our stone of help. The bread and the fruit of the vine are weekly reminders, “With your help, oh Lord, we have made it to another first day of the week, and we partake of this meal together to remember.”

But back to the stone of help: Especially during difficult times, it is important that we remember how God has helped us in the past. And it’s important that God’s help gets communicated, especially to our children, especially from one generation to the next within the congregation. Somehow, those who are older need to communicate to those who are younger, ***“Thus far the Lord has helped us.”***

Conclusion:

When Samuel raised the Ebenezer, it was a turning point in the history of God’s people. They had suffered for twenty years as a result of turning away from God, but they mourned, and at the preaching of God’s word, the people had a change of heart, they set aside their idols, they returned to God, and they served him only. This morning, as we sing, let’s be thankful for what God has done. But let’s also resolve that if we’ve wandered away from God in some way, that we turn back. And let’s allow today to be a turning point, a new birth (as we learned about last week).

As I was studying this passage, I wondered: Why did these people wait twenty years? We don’t know. But we do know why we wander. So, if there’s something missing in your life, if you haven’t yet obeyed the gospel, we invite you to take that step today. Turn away from sin, turn to God, and call out to him for salvation in the act of immersion in water for the forgiveness of your sins. If you’ve wandered, come back. If you have any questions

at all or would like to study, get in touch with one of the elders after worship today. But if you are ready to obey the gospel immediately, we hope you'll let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com