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Sermon

August 15th, Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

To the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the One who is, who was, and is to come, to Him be glory forever amen. (Rev 1:8 NKJ)

Our sermon text for this Sunday is taken from 1 Samuel chapter 7, beginning at verse 5:

Samuel said, “Gather all Israel to Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you.” 6 So Israel gathered together at Mizpah. They drew water and poured it out before the LORD. They fasted that day, and they said there, “We have sinned against the LORD.” Samuel acted as judge for the people of Israel at Mizpah. 7 When the Philistines heard that the Israelites had gathered together at Mizpah, the serens of the Philistines went up against Israel. When the people of Israel heard this, they were afraid of the Philistines, 8 and the people of Israel said to Samuel, “Do not stop crying out for us to the LORD our God, so that he will save us out of the hand of the Philistines.” 9 So Samuel took a nursing lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. He cried out to the LORD on behalf of Israel, and the LORD answered him. 10 As Samuel was offering the burnt offering, the Philistines approached to engage in battle with Israel, but on that day the LORD thundered against the Philistines with a loud roar and threw them into a panic, so they were struck down before Israel. 11 The men of Israel went out from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them down until they arrived at a point below Beth Kar. 12 Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named that place Ebenezer, saying, “The LORD has helped us this far.” 13 So the Philistines were subdued, and they no longer came into the territory of Israel. The LORD’s hand was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel.

This is the Word of the LORD!!!

Mercy, Grace, and peace are yours through your God and Father, and through His Son, Jesus Christ, true God and Man, dear fellow Sons and Daughters of the King...

Have you ever had to look for “assisted living”? Perhaps you have. Most times when we must look for assisted living, it is not for ourselves, but rather for a loved one. What even is it? There comes a point in everyone’s life where you can no longer take care of yourself. Eventually, the body and mind break down to the point where you can no longer do the everyday things to maintain your way of life. So, we are put into these “assisted living” facilities, where there is a staff in place to help us (assist us) and make sure that we get the care that we need.

It can be a hard thing to do. Why is it hard? Well, because you are admitting a hard reality. That the person or people who raised you, that helped you with the everyday things when you were little, can no longer even do that for themselves. It can be painful to admit, but it’s a reality. If we all live long enough,

we will probably need it. We need care and attention when we are babies, and we need care and attention when we are old.

And yet, don’t we all need assisted living all the time in some way, shape, or form? I don’t care who you are, you cannot live or survive alone. Some people try, like the Mountain Men who lived off the land in solitude for years. It may seem like a good idea at times, but that is a hard life. We are created to be social creatures. Part of that is that we rely on others. Whether it is hospital workers, police officers, or even sanitation workers, we all end up relying on others. Every life is assisted in some way.

For the Christian, this is a fact of faith. We know by faith that we do not live our lives in a vacuum, all by ourselves. We know that God has put people in place to help us. We also know that God Himself is

the truest of all helpers. If there was no God, there would be no us. Most important of all, He gives us all a future and hope based off sins forgiven by Christ. Without the help of the LORD, we would be lost. As Paul quotes in that sermon we heard today, **for in Him we live and move and have our being**

We are all assisted in our living by God Himself! He provides this assistance in various ways. We are assisted by fellow believers. We are assisted through answered prayers. And, we are ultimately assisted through His merciful and miraculous deliverance. We pray: LET THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH AND THE MEDITATION OF OUR HEARTS BE ACCEPTABLE IN YOUR SIGHT, O LORD, OUR ROCK AND REDEEMER. AMEN!

Here in our text, we have the last Judge, the man known as Samuel. The time of the Kings was fast approaching. A chapter later Israel would demand such a King. There would be all kinds of baggage that would go along with that wish. But, in our text, the people needed what they had always needed. They needed deliverance.

Samuel said, "Gather all Israel to Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you."

The people known as the Philistines had been a thorn in the side of Israel. They were always in conflict with God's people. Recently, Israel had waged war against them. When the battle went poorly for Israel, they brought up the Ark of the Covenant into battle. They thought that this would swing the battle in their favor. They were mistaken. They were relying on the Ark as a good luck charm. They should have trusted in the LORD, and because of that failure, their army were routed.

Treating the Holy Ark of the Covenant like a rabbit's foot was a problem. But they had a bigger problem. They didn't just disrespect God's Ark, they had disrespected the LORD Himself! **Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, "If you return to the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from**

among you, and prepare your hearts for the LORD, and serve Him only; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines." (1Sa 7:3 NKJ)

Philistia wasn't the real thorn in the side, it was idolatry. Yes, the nation worshiped the LORD. But they also worshipped other false gods as well. The ones mentioned here are Baal and His female counterpart Asherah. Ironically enough, these gods were associated with fertility, not just children, but more so fertility of crops. It was the LORD who kept them alive in the wilderness, who caused water to spring forth from rocks. But now, they would pray to these foreign and nonexistent gods.

God hates idols. He is very explicit about this fact. It's literally the very first commandment. **I am the LORD, that is My name; And My glory I will not give to another, Nor My praise to carved images.** (Isa 42:8 NKJ)

Look at that account we had in Acts this morning. As Paul walked through that ancient city, **his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.** (Act 17:16 NKJ) His conclusion about the men of that city was simple. **"Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; (Act 17:22 NKJ)** Paul would capitalize on this and try to tell them just who that unknown God was.

They were much different that we are now, right? If Paul were to walk through one of our cities in America, would he have had the same conclusion? Maybe. We have hundreds of thousands of churches littered throughout the country. We don't have idols like the Canaanites or the Athenians. But we aren't all that different.

In all things, we aren't very religious. People don't like that word anymore. It's quite the sheik thing to say, "I'm not religious, I am *SPIRITUAL*..." Our laws and policies often reflect this lack of religion in our land. The public sentiment these days is you should be allowed to love whoever you want, regardless of gender. Gender itself has somehow become

ambiguous. Americans worship the idols of the science, reason, and unrelative truth.

6 So Israel gathered together at Mizpah. They drew water and poured it out before the LORD. They fasted that day, and they said there, "We have sinned against the LORD." Samuel acted as judge for the people of Israel at Mizpah.

But we Christians are just as guilty as the Israelites were. Why does God hate Idolatry? It takes credit and glory away from Him and puts it somewhere it does not belong. Sure, we don't have Baals and Asherah's in our homes. But idolatry is dangerous because it can take any form. Just fill in the idol. The dollar bill. Our own hobbies. Our careers. Media. Facebook. Art. Celebrities. Sports. All these things have a way of becoming way too important in our lives, and we end up worshipping and depending on them instead of worshipping and depending on God!

Here Samuel acted as judge for the people. He prayed to the LORD on their behalf. Through the work of Christ, anyone can come to God and ask for forgiveness. We don't need people to act this way anymore, but we still do it. That's why I am here today. To plead to the LORD on your behalf. To administer the means of grace, the Word and Sacrament. To instruct people in the ways of the LORD. To draw out Law and Gospel. This is what we call our pastors to do. God has always assisted His people by sending servants to call them back to Him and to preach His Word!

7 When the Philistines heard that the Israelites had gathered together at Mizpah, the serens of the Philistines went up against Israel. When the people of Israel heard this, they were afraid of the Philistines, 8 and the people of Israel said to Samuel, "Do not stop crying out for us to the LORD our God, so that he will save us out of the hand of the Philistines."

The Philistines were feeling confident. After all, they had just crushed this army, why not attack again?

As the people were gathered here for this public repentance and sacrifice, the Philistines saw the opportunity to attack. This terrified the people, and they came back to their leader with a very desperate and specific instruction: **Do not stop crying out for us to the LORD our God**

The people had not come out to fight. They were there to fast and repent. They were vulnerable. They could see that quite clearly.

And really, that is what repentance does to us. It makes us see how things really are. It's so easy to forget how weak and small we truly are. We take every day for granted. We become complacent. We don't recognize how sinful we actually are. But when confronted with the Law, we see truly how doomed we actually are. Here for Israel, the physical danger reflected the spiritual.

So, Samuel offers up a sacrifice, a young lamb, and prays for the people. And then... **GOD SHOWS UP! He cried out to the LORD on behalf of Israel, and the LORD answered him.**

And boy did He! What happens seems like something out of a movie. Here you have the people and the prophet, praying to God. I picture the Philistines completely surrounding the people. They start to march toward them, about to slaughter the people. As they charge, all of a sudden, **THE LORD** thundered out of heaven. This completely discombobulated the army, and they were confused and panicked. Then, the rout was on. The people of Israel, who a moment ago were afraid of being slaughtered, now are the ones doing the slaughtering. How quickly the tables turned!

But that's what happens when God answers prayers. All seemed lost until that prayer. But, God uses those moments when it seems like the sky is falling to remind us that's He's in complete control. Why is it that we are so quick to forget about praying to God? It's used as a last resort! "All we can do now is pray..." "All we can do is pray"? Prayer is the most powerful tool you have because you are praying to the most powerful being of all time!

God knows all things. He knows what we need even before we do. But He still wants us to ask for them. Pray without ceasing! The prayer of a righteous person accomplishes much! God will always provide you assistance. All you need to do is ask! **"And do not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind. 30 "For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. 31 "But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you. 32 "Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. (Luk 12:29-32 NKJ)**

When the dust settles after this thundering, and the army thunders back to Philistia, there is an opportunity to remember this awesome deliverance. Samuel does something that we saw Jacob do a few weeks back. He sets up a rock to dedicate the moment to THE ROCK, The LORD almighty! **12 Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named that place Ebenezer, saying, "The LORD has helped us this far."**

When you think about the name Ebenezer, what first comes to mind? Is it that character from a Christmas Carol, Ebenezer Scrooge? People don't really go by it anymore these days. It's too bad because it has an awesome meaning. Ebenezer means, "Stone of help". That is truly what our God is!

But isn't it strange the way that Samuel applies the name? **"The LORD has helped us THIS FAR."** The help of the LORD has been given and is acknowledged, but the future seems to be up in the air, doesn't it? Certainly, the help that had just been given could not be denied. The people went from prey to predator in the blink of an eye, rather, the answer of a prayer. But why is future help from the LORD left undetermined?

Well... it really isn't. What Samuel said there at Mizpah those thousand of years ago can still be said to this day, and it also be stated a thousand years after us if the world goes on that long. The LORD has

helped us this far. Because He is who He is, the LORD will continue to help us each and every single day. The only thing that can be in doubt about the future is whether or not we remember where that help comes from.

Our theme today is the LORD assists us. From the text, it says God is our help. But both term, "assistance" and "help", really fail to match up with the reality of what our God does for us. He does just assist us, that implies we can do things on our own. He isn't just our help; He is the only One who can do anything for you!

God being our help is a constant refrain throughout scripture. **You have been my help; Do not leave me nor forsake me, O God of my salvation. (Psa 27:9 NKJ) But I am poor and needy; Yet the Lord thinks upon me. You are my help and my deliverer; (Psa 40:17 NKJ) I will lift up my eyes to the hills-- From whence comes my help? 2 My help comes from the LORD, Who made heaven and earth. (Psa 121:1-2 NKJ)** God has always been our help. From the foundations of the earth, from this time forth unto eternity, the LORD helps His people!

That Ebenezer, that Rock, would stand as a memorial to that fact. Rocks aren't alive, but this rock would serve as a living reminder of the Help which the LORD provides. But it points ahead to another Ebenezer which would be raised. When Jesus was raised on the cross, that was the ultimate Ebenezer. That was the help that was planned and prophesied since the fall into sin. **Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, 5 you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1Pe 2:4-5 NKJ)**

The most fundamental flaw that we have as humans is that we don't want help. We want to do things by ourselves. This is on display from our toddler days when we want to do all by ourselves. We do not want help until we realize that we absolutely need it. That is what the Law makes us know. That we cannot

do it by ourselves, that we need someone else's help. But the Gospel reveals that the Help has already been given. Jesus died on the cross so that your sins could be blotted out forever. God helps us with our most basic problem. We were dead in trespasses and sins. But He has made you alive through the death of His son. The lamb was sacrificed here by Samuel. Then the prayer was answered, and help was given. Jesus was sacrificed at Calvary, and the prayer of every believer ever was given a resounding "I HAVE HELPED YOU" from the LORD.

"Assisted living". It's kind of a nice term for feeble and broken-down people. Again, you will need it if you live that long. But we all need assistance, don't we? Whether you are old or young, it makes no difference. We always need help.

And help is always given. God helps you. He does this by giving you support through the fellowship. He does this by answering your prayers. And ultimately, He does it by delivering you from this veil of tears. No assisted living home can truly offer you the real assistance that you need. The real assistance comes when you are taken out of this world and restored holy around the throne of the Lamb. All praise and thanks be to Jesus Christ, our eternal Ebenezer, for **The LORD has helped us THIS FAR! AMEN!!!**