

## When You Need Help From God 1 Samuel 7

In the 1960's movie *The Magnificent Seven* Steve McQueen's character, Vin Tanner, tells a joke about a man falling from a 10 story building. He said the people on every floor on the way down heard him say, "So far, so good."

Sometimes we say the phrase, "So far, so good" meaning, "Right now things are going well. Right now things are going as expected." Many people would look at their journey and say, "So far so bad." We feel like this because our lives aren't exactly where we want them to be. A relationship takes a wrong turn, a career path doesn't take you where you thought it might, a dream of having children or starting a business, that dream seems far away. The story in 1 Samuel 7 begins in an altar of despair, but it was a place where God showed up. For 20 years things had been bad, and they had become comfortable with things being not good. This story ends with "so far, so God."

Maybe you're in a place where God hasn't seemed to show up yet, or it is "So far, so bad." God is the author and perfecter of our faith. This story ends in happy forever at the altar. I can't promise that the journey will be easy, but I can promise that He will never leave you nor forsake you. And I can tell you this, the best is yet to come.

*"Till now the Lord has helped us."* 1 Samuel 7:2-12

### 1. A Brokenness To Confess

*"From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord."* 1 Samuel 7:2

The phrase "*A long time*" meant that Israel had the ark back, but things were not really set right. For 20 years, the ark wasn't where it was supposed to be. 20 years is a long time. The ark contained the stone tablets of the law of Moses, Aaron's rod that budded, and manna from the wilderness journey. The ark represented the presence of God, the provision of God, and the power of God. The men of Kirjath Jearim treated the ark of the covenant with respect and honor, but they did not place it in the tabernacle. Instead of resting at the house of God, it was brought into the house of Abinadab.

Israel found they were no more right with God just because they had the ark of the covenant again. Instead, "*all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD.*" They had good reason to lament. Their cities were in ruins, their armies were defeated, and they were under Philistine domination – all because they were not right with God.

God would reveal Himself at the mercy seat between the cherubim that graced the cover of that ark, the presence of God. You can't do the will of God without the ark of God.

This can also be true for some of us. We are in a spiritual slump, and it has been 20 years now. We've fallen into idolatry just like the Israelites. We don't carve statues, but we don't seek God first. We are trying to live life in our own strength, in our own wisdom.

We can't do the will of God without the ark of God. We need the power of God, and the presence of God, and the provision of God to get where God wants us to go.

More than 100 years ago, William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, said "The chief danger that confronts the coming century will be religion without the Holy Spirit, Christianity without Christ, forgiveness without repentance, salvation without regeneration, politics without God and heaven without hell."

You have to get to an altar, to a place where you are in a posture of humility and a posture of sacrifice and a posture of prayer. When we do, God is going to come in His way.

We build an altar by getting into God's Word. We build an altar by getting into a posture of prayer. Make an altar every morning. Make an altar every night.

*“So Samuel said to all the Israelites, ‘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, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.’ So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only.”* 1 Samuel 7:3-4

- Samuel preaches repentance, both outward and inward.

God raised up Samuel as a prophet and a judge (1 Samuel 4:1).

He had a burden for his people and his nation. Samuel called the nation to repentance. The repentance had to be *inward* (with all your hearts) and *outward* (put away the foreign gods). The inward was more important than the outward, and it had to come first. That is why Samuel *first called* Israel to return to the LORD with all your hearts, then told them to put away the foreign gods.

We can know if Israel did return to the LORD with all their hearts by seeing if they really did put away the foreign gods. No one could see their heart, but they *could* see if they put away the foreign gods.

*“And serve Him only.”* 1 Samuel 7:3

Israel did not feel they rejected the LORD; they felt they only *added* the worship of other gods to their worship of the LORD. Samuel called on Israel to turn their backs on these other gods and serve Him only.

*“A worse enemy than the Philistines held sway over the land... the people were thus in double bondage; the heavy yoke of the Philistines was upon them, because the heavier burden of a false worship crushed out the life of their hearts.”* Charles Spurgeon

*“So the children of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only.”* 1 Samuel 7:4

The local gods of *Baal* and *Ashtoreth* were popular idols among the people of Israel. *Baal* was attractive because he was thought to be the god of weather, bringing good crops and financial success. *Ashtoreth* was attractive because she was thought to be the goddess of fertility, thus connected to love and sex.

*“Ashtoreth was worshipped over a wide area as the goddess of fertility, love and war, and plaques of naked female figures from the Bronze and Iron Ages in Palestine are numerous. The *Baals* were the corresponding male deities.”* —Joyce Baldwin

*“Baal, god of fertility and the storm, was believed to be the son of Dagon, god of grain. Ashtoreth, goddess of love and fertility, vied for supremacy with Asherah, mother-goddess and consort of El... The association of Baal, Asherah, and Ashtoreth with fertility, particularly as expressed in depraved sexual ritual at Canaanite shrines, made them especially abominable in the Lord's eyes.”* —Ronald Youngblood

## 2. A Burden To Carry

*“Then Samuel said, ‘Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you.’ So 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 people of Israel at Mizpah.”* 1 Samuel 7:5-6

This was a place remembered for separation and repentance. This is where Jacob separated from Laban (Genesis 31:49) and was the gathering place for a repentant Israel in Judges 20:1.

*“I will pray to the LORD for you.”* 1 Samuel 7:5

Samuel had already called the nation to repentance, and they made a start at it. Samuel knew God’s work in them could only be completed through prayer.

In Hebrew, Mizpah means “watchtower.” We all need a watchtower, a place we can go and seek God. Where is your watchtower? Where do you need to go to seek the Lord?

In Habakkuk 2, the prophet says, *“I will take my stand at my watch post and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.”* Habakkuk 2:1

Watchtowers would be built in fields, and shepherds would go up to watch their flocks. They were built into city walls. The ancient watchmen would climb up into that watchtower and they would watch for trading caravans or invading armies. They saw first, and they saw farthest. Those who pray see first, and they see things you can’t see with the naked eye. They see both potential and opportunity. They recognize when God is in a burning bush. Samuel calls the people to Mizpah, to the watchtower, and he says he will intercede with the Lord for you. Without intercession, there is no Ebenezer.

Walter Wink says, “History belongs to the intercessors. Intercessory prayer is spiritual defense of what is in the way of what God has promised.”

I love and appreciate our entire team and our staff, but I am grateful for our intercession team and for our prayer teams. They are intercessors, and I have the privilege of seeing firsthand the way they pray. When I need prayer, those are the people I’m going to call to pray for me, and I have experienced miracles in my life because of the prayers they have prayed for me.

Who are you interceding for? Samuel is interceding for the Israelites. Who are you interceding for their salvation?

We need to be a Samuel in someone else’s life. Who are you interceding for in prayer? Who are you standing in the gap for? For their healing? For their salvation? For their deliverance? For their provision? For their wisdom and direction?

Intercession is pressing in, and praying through, and praying with a little more intentionality and a little more intensity.

Some of us need to come to the altar, not for you, but for someone else. When you don’t need something, hit your knees and thank God for that and then start praying for someone else.

Sometimes I wonder why it is awkward going to the altar. Our power is demonstrated in the altar. God’s presence is experienced at the altar. God’s provision is gained at the altar. We survive on prayer.

Prayer puts us on the frontlines of ministry. We are not called to sit on the sidelines. We are called to be on the frontlines, to intercede for those who don’t have a voice and for those who can’t help themselves.

Who are you interceding for? We all need a Samuel in our lives who will intercede for us.

I pray God will give us, as a church, a spirit of intercession. Not just a gifting for people on a prayer team but give us a profound burden for those who are not saved, those who are sick, those who need deliverance, those who need a touch from God, and for those who simply need to know that there is a God who loves them and has a plan and purpose for their lives. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear.

“So they gathered together at Mizpah” 1 Samuel 7:6

This showed that Israel felt a *spiritual* need at the time. They expressed their repentance both by putting away the bad and by pursuing the good. The *experience* of conviction of sin proves nothing. It is our response to conviction that demonstrates repentance.

“Drew water, and poured it out before the LORD.” 1 Samuel 6

A ceremonial pouring of water demonstrated the soul poured out before the LORD. It was an expression of emptiness and need. Some translations say, “*They poured out their hearts like water in penance before the Lord.*” They were saying in effect, we could wish to shed as many tears for our sins as there are drops of water in this bucket; but because we cannot do this, behold, we do what we can.” —John Trapp

They expressed the same heart as Lamentations 2:19, “*Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the watches; pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord.*”

“*And they fasted that day, and said there, ‘We have sinned against the LORD.’*” 1 Samuel 7:6

*Fasting* is a way of saying that nothing else really mattered except getting right with God and by *confession* it was a straightforward claim of guilt and responsibility.

1 John 1:5-10 makes it clear that confession is vital to maintain a *relationship* with God. As God convicts us of sin or sins that hinder fellowship with Him, we must confess them and receive forgiveness and cleansing for our relationship with God to continue without hindrance.

“*And Samuel judged the children of Israel.*” 1 Samuel 7:6

Samuel was the last judge, and he was a judge over Israel as were the leaders in the book of Judges, but his leadership was more spiritual than military.

### **3. A Battle To Claim**

“*Now when the Philistines heard that the children of Israel had gathered together at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the children of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines.*” 1 Samuel 7:7

The Philistines were right to be afraid of a repentant, God-seeking Israel because, with God fighting for them, Israel was invincible. When the Philistines looked at a humble and repentant Israel, they probably saw *weakness*.

“When the children of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines.” 1 Samuel 7:7

The Israelites didn’t have much more spiritual understanding than the Philistines. They should have been more confident in the LORD. Our feelings of confidence can deceive us. In 1 Samuel 4:5, Israel was completely confident against the Philistines, but their confidence was false, and they were soon defeated. Here, Israel is

fearful and sure of defeat, and they have no confidence at all. They seemed to have more faith when they trusted in the ark than when they were humble and repentant before the LORD. Small faith in the true and living God is more powerful than strong faith in a lie.

*“So the children of Israel said 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.’ And Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. Then Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him.”* 1 Samuel 7:8-9

The last time Israel was in this kind of situation they said, *“Let’s get the ark of the covenant and take it into battle with us. Then we can’t lose!”* Now they are much wiser before the LORD, and instead of trusting in the ark, they did the right thing and asked Samuel to cry out to the LORD their God for them.

*“Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD.”* 1 Samuel 7:9

Samuel took time for a sacrifice at such a critical point because he knew he could only effectively pray in light of God’s atoning sacrifice. Think of that poor lamb – a suckling lamb – which never hurt anyone or which never sinned itself, yet its blood was poured out, its body cut up, and its carcass burned. Why? Because Samuel and Israel had to say, *“This is what we deserve. This is the punishment that should come upon us. We thank you, God, for accepting the punishment of this innocent lamb instead.”*

We say the same thing. When we trust in Jesus as *“The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”* John 1:29

Because someone innocent died, someone guilty gets to go free. This is the message of Christianity. This is what makes our faith different.

*“And the LORD answered him.”* 1 Samuel 7:9

The battle had not yet been fought, and a hostile Philistine army approached. Yet, in a real way, the battle was over and already won because the LORD answered him. Samuel was a mighty man of prayer.

*“Samuel was among those who called upon His name; they called upon the LORD, and He answered them.”* Psalm 99:6

*“The LORD thundered with a loud thunder.”* 1 Samuel 7:10 God fought from heaven on behalf of Israel and defeated the Philistines. This was a special work of God because the Israelites heard the same thunder, but only the Philistines became so confused that they were overcome. God not only sent thunder, He also sent *confusion* to the Philistines and *confidence* to Israel.

*“The LORD thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites. The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth Kar.”* 1 Samuel 7:10-11

This was the kind of victory Israel hoped for in 1 Samuel 4 when they brought the ark of the covenant into battle. If they had only repented and sought the LORD as they did here, they could have had this kind of victory long ago.

The hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel.... the cities which the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel. Samuel was not a military man, but he was just as successful as, or more successful than, Israel’s best generals because the LORD fought for Samuel. Samuel was successful not only as a man of war, but also as a man of peace.

*“Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen, and called its name Ebenezer, saying, ‘Thus far the LORD has helped us.’”* 1 Samuel 7:12

Samuel knew the nation needed to remember this amazing victory, which came to a humble and repentant Israel. The LORD won this battle, not Israel – so he named the stone Ebenezer, meaning “*stone of help*.”

Samuel knew the LORD did a great work, yet he knew there was much more to be accomplished. So he could say, “The LORD has helped us to this point in time and up to this geographical place.”

Samuel set up an altar as a reminder. It wasn't a memorial of their hard times or of their more recent victories. It was a memorial to God's faithfulness. Here we raise our Ebenezer because “*Thus far has the Lord helped us.*” 1 Samuel 7:12

That's a reminder we could always use! Israel didn't need a memorial to the tough times they had been through. After all, they had experienced them. You don't need a memorial to your loss and grief. Some things you never forget. Those ancient Israelites weren't likely to forget the twenty years of discouragement.

Memory is an amazing thing. Psychologists tell us that we never really forget anything. Every experience, good and bad, is filed securely in our mental memory banks. Sometimes we forget where we put it, but it is still there. It is good that we forget some things. That is a part of our created survival mechanism.

Doctors say that Private Jessica Lynch, the young soldier who was wounded, captured, and abused during the early days of the Iraqi War, has no recollection of the time between her capture and her rescue. That's probably very good. It is a gift of God that some of the memories of our hardest times fade so quickly.

We never forget most of the really important things in life. Even when the memories start to grow dim, there are always lots of memorials to bring back our recall. That's what we discover about the passing of our loved ones. We forget some of the difficult days. The grief may not be as deep or the tears as heavy as they once were, but we don't forget. We never will.

We have plenty of memorials to remind us of the one we loved so deeply and who was gone before us in the form of a cemetery marker. It may be a simple stone monument with a few ordinary words. It is a memorial to something far greater. A life lived. Memories shared. Love that will last forever.

Samuel wanted the memory of God's faithfulness to remain. That was Samuel's challenge. He wanted his people to not only remember what they had been through. He wanted them to never forget the Lord who had seen them through it. Remember, it was God whose greatness and goodness sustained them every step of the way, and will in the future! That was why that memorial was named Ebenezer, “*Thus far has the Lord helped us.*”

God has helped you. He was helping you in the good times. Those good times, those good memories, those days and years shared with your loved one were all a gift of God. He gave them to you. He granted the laughter and joy. He was helping you share those good times. He helps you remember them.

Samuel was acknowledging how hard those dark days would have been if He had not been there lifting them up. God was the one who sent the neighbors and friends with the kind words and warm embrace. He gave you the strength you needed when you needed it. He was there even when you didn't think you could handle another disappointment, but you did. Because He helped you! Here we raise our Ebenezer.

Robert Louis Stevenson, in one of his stories, tells of a passenger ship crossing the Atlantic. It encountered a harsh storm that threatened to sink the ship. The captain ordered the passengers to go below while the crew battled the storm above. At one point, the passengers grew impatient. They hadn't heard a word from the bridge

in the longest time. Finally, a volunteer ventured out to see how things were going. A short time later, the man returned to the huddled passengers. "Did you see the captain? What did he say? Are we going to make it?" The messenger responded, "I didn't talk to the captain, but I saw him. He looked at me and smiled. All is well!" And that was enough!

In the midst of your heartache and loss, the God of heaven smiled. The storm still raged, but your Captain smiled. All is well. Here we raise our Ebenezer. Thus far, the Lord has helped us.

The Old Testament Psalm sang of this help. *"I lift up my eyes to the hills-where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip-he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD watches over you-the LORD is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all harm-he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore."* Psalm 121

Poet Annie Johnson Flint worded this truth, "God hath not promised skies always blue, flower-strewn pathways all our lives through; God hath not promised sun without rain, joy without sorrow, peace without pain. But God has promised strength for the day, rest for the labor; light for the way, grace for the trials, help from above, unfailing sympathy, undying love."

Those who served in the military, and even those who haven't, are familiar with the quiet notes of "Taps." Each day, the melody of the bugler brings even the most chaotic day to a calm close. Fittingly, the same melody is sounded over the final resting-place of a fallen soldier. We know the melody, but few of us know the words to "Taps." "Day is done, Gone the sun, From the lakes, From the hills, From the sky. All is well, Safely rest, God is nigh."

That's the memorial we need. God is nigh! He has not abandoned us. He was with us in the valley of the shadow of death. He will be with us whatever the future brings. That's a truth we must never forget. That's a precious promise that we must memorialize for the next generation and the one after that!

We gather to remember. We recall some things we will never forget. We should never forget the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus on our behalf as the spotless lamb of God.