

## The Path to Victory

Last week's headline news in major newspapers, television and on the internet was dominated by the latest terrorist attack—this time in Manchester, England. Over 22, mostly young people, were killed and over 60 injured. Obviously, we live in a dangerous world.

Though this latest terrorist attack occurred in Great Britain, the performers at the concert hall were Americans, which was also the case at the night club massacre in Paris two years ago. This is hardly a coincidence. Americans are in the crosshairs of Radical Islamic Terrorism and so are Christians around the world. The work for freedom accomplished by our fallen and wounded soldiers that we remember tomorrow, is under attack today. We can't help but wonder and fear where all of this is leading. Will the sacrifice of millions, in the end, be for nothing?

Two weeks ago, on Mother's Day, we sang the old hymn: "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing." There are words in the original hymn that some of the more modern hymnals have unfortunately removed or re-written. The first two lines of the second stanza are supposed to read, "Here I raise my Ebenezer; Hither by Thy help I'm come. And I hope, by Thy good pleasure, Safely to arrive at home."

The Ebenezer reference comes from I Samuel 7:12. In context, the people of Israel had been defeated in battle by their arch enemies, the Philistines. The Ark of the Covenant had been captured. The Israelites were made to pay tribute to the Philistines.

As an aside, the Philistines couldn't keep the Ark of the Covenant among them, for while it was a blessing to the Israelites, it's presence brought disease and death to the Philistines, so they voluntarily returned the Ark to the village of Kiriath Jearim in Israel. Nevertheless, the Israelites served the Philistines for 20 years.

This brings us to I Samuel 7. Verses 2-4 say: "*The ark remained at Kiriath Jearim a long time—twenty years in all. Then all the people of Israel turned back to the Lord. 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*

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*Philistines.' So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the Lord only.*"

What this tells us is that the Israelites had previously rebelled against the Lord. They worshiped foreign gods, and the true God withdrew His glory from them. Twenty years later, they realized the consequences of their rebellion and turned back to the Lord. As soon as they returned to the Lord, the Lord returned to them. **They got right with God.**

I Samuel 7:5-6 tell us: "*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.' Now Samuel was serving as leader of Israel at Mizpah.*"

Another aside here is that "Mizpah" is what Jacob called the place where he and his father-in-law, Laban, parted company. According to Genesis 31, Jacob took his wives and property and fled from Laban because of the way Laban had sought to enslave him--also for twenty years. After Laban caught up with Jacob and accused him of stealing his household gods but could find no proof, the two men made a covenant not to harm each other in the future. Jacob set up a stone as a remembrance of that covenant. He called the place "Mizpah" and prayed: "*The LORD watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another.*" Thus Mizpah was a place of deliverance. Literally, **Mizpah means "watchtower."**

I Samuel 7 brings us to another watchtower and to the renewal of a covenant—the covenant between God and His people. By sacrifice, fasting and confession, Israel returned their hearts to the Lord and the Lord returned His glory to them.

I Samuel 7:7-8 say: "*When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled at Mizpah, the rulers of the Philistines came up to attack them. When the Israelites heard of it, they were afraid because of the Philistines. 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.'*"

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What happened here is that the Philistines reacted to the Israelites assembling together. They saw this meeting as a threat and decided to attack them to keep them subdued. We also see that though the Israelites were afraid, they now knew where their salvation resided. They asked Samuel to keep crying out to the Lord on their behalf.

In I Samuel 7:9-10, we see the result of their request: "*Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and sacrificed it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. He cried out to the Lord on Israel's behalf, and the Lord answered him. While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle. But that day 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.*"

We notice here that the Lord fought for Israel. The Lord thundered against the Philistines, throwing them into a panic. The Lord won the battle. The Israelites merely performed the clean-up operation.

When the dust had cleared, we come finally to verse 12: "*Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, 'Thus far the Lord has helped us.'*" **The word "Ebenezer means "stone of help."**

Coming back to the lines we find in Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing, the second stanza begins, "Here I raise my Ebenezer"—my "stone of help." "Hither"—in the past, to this place—"by Thy help"—by the Lord's help—"I've come." "And I hope, by Thy good pleasure, Safely to arrive at home."

At this point in the history of our nation, when our sacred values and the freedoms our heroes and heroines have sacrificed to purchase and preserve are under attack, we need to take a page from I Samuel 7. To the extent that we have strayed from the Lord and allowed our faith and godly values to be eroded by this present culture, we need to repent and return wholeheartedly to the Lord.

We need to remember that our ultimate safety does not reside in the might of our military. Nor is it found in the resolve or wisdom of any earthly leaders. Our Ebenezer is God Almighty; He and He alone is our

stone of help our rock of defense. If He is with us none can stand against us. If we forsake Him nothing else can protect us.

It's also important for us to see what Samuel did when the people asked him to intercede on their behalf: "Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and sacrificed it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord." Samuel sacrificed a little baby lamb. This seems cruel, even barbaric to our modern minds. But this baby lamb, innocent and pure along with all the passover lambs that came before it, was the forerunner of the One that came after it. We remember what John the Baptist said of Jesus: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

The Lord God is our Rock of Defense and Jesus is our Savior. Our God is mighty to save. Our God has brought us safely to this time and place in history and, if we hold fast to Him, by His good pleasure He will lead us safely home. Psalm 33:12 says, "*Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom He has chosen as His heritage!*"

To bring this message a bit closer to home, let's see how this might apply to our church. In truth, we as individuals or even together as a church can't do a whole lot to bring our nation back to God. If all the Christians across our nation would join together in wholehearted prayer and service, then maybe we could turn the tide, but unless God brings deep conviction on a lot of people this needed transformation isn't likely to occur any time soon.

In the life of a local church, however, renewal can come very quickly. What is needed is for all of us to put our faith in the right place. When going through difficult times, when the devil seems to be gaining ground and we seem to be losing it, we need to remember that our Ebenezer is the Lord God and that our Savior is Jesus Christ. It's not a matter of who the preacher is or who sits on Church Council. That's not where the power is. The power is in our three-personed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That's Who we need to come to our rescue. Without Him we are dead in the water; with Him nothing is too difficult. As Paul says, "*We are more than conquerors through Christ who gives us strength.*"

Bringing it down a little further, our battle is certainly not against the Philistines, and it may have little to do with the changing values of

western culture. More likely the battleground is in our own homes, at work, at school, and on our various playgrounds. The battleground is the neighborhood where we live. The battleground is in our own hearts and minds.

The question is, what do we do when we get in trouble on these personal battlefields? Where do we look for assistance? Where do we find our Mizpah, a watchtower for our souls? Who is our Ebenezer? Are we trusting in the Lamb of God, who shed His blood and died, that we might live for His glory? Do we remember Him? Is our focus on Him? Is our trust in Him every day or only for an hour or two on Sundays? Do we cry out to Him with our whole being? Do we see Him as our first line of defense or only the last? What stones of remembrance have we erected in our lives to keep our eyes on Him as Lord and Savior every moment of every day?

Coming down one step further still, let me ask you this: what danger are you facing in your life this morning? Bud and Rachelle are facing major surgery. Maybe you are as well. Or maybe you are embroiled in conflict in your marriage or with your kids. Maybe you are facing a financial crisis or insecurity in your employment. Then again you may be dealing with a scary diagnosis from your physician or a prognosis that shortens your life expectancy. It's time to turn our faces to the Lord and seek Him with our whole hearts. It's time to say: "**Here I raise my Ebenezer. The Lord has brought me safe this far and the Lord will bring me safely home.**"

Turning from all known sin in true repentance, trusting and seeking the Lord with all our hearts, crying out to him from the depths of our souls, setting up our Mizpahs and Ebenezers: this is the path to victory.

## The Fourth Street Church of God

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Sermon for May 28, 2017

## The Path to Victory

I Samuel 7:2-14

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