

"Morning by Morning New Mercies I See" (1 Samuel 7:2-17)

Introduction:-

Perhaps you have not missed him. You may have been so caught up in the intervening story about the Ark that you have not thought about him. Yet, here Samuel now appears again, and this spells good news for Israel. Is it not a fact in life that when our heroes and saviours appear again, after a period of time away, we welcome them back with a sigh of relief, and with a greater confidence about the future. Well, this is the first mention of Samuel since 1 Samuel chapter 3, and therefore we have been without him for three whole chapters. And as we have seen, those chapters have only spelt darkness and despair for Israel, for in the meantime, their sanctuary at Shiloh had also probably been destroyed by the Philistines. And as Samuel's first appearance in 1 Samuel 3 was a sign of fresh grace to Israel, through the reappearance of God's Word, so here in chapter 7, Samuel's reappearance at Mizpah, coincides with new mercies that Israel desperately needs. And as we seek new mercies from God's hand today, let us now see how this is possible, as this chapter unfolds before us.

1. First we discover the Preparation necessary for God's Mercy (verses 2-6).

It may come to us as no surprise that in life there is a preparation that is required for most things that relate to us. And in this section of text, there were some vital signs of spiritual awakening during the twenty years that the Ark was at Kiriath Jearim, for during this time, all the house of Israel mourned, and sought after the Lord. Perhaps this mourning was due to the fact that Israel had failed to halt the Philistine incursion into their land, but now they realized that nothing less than the power of God was required in order to bring them complete deliverance and security. Tears and deep sorrow obviously characterized the first vital stage of this movement, but this was not enough, in order to demonstrate a true repentance before God. And this is precisely the point at which Samuel makes his appearance in verse 3, where he says to the whole house of Israel, "If with all of your hearts (in the emphatic position in the Hebrew for emphasis), you are returning to the Lord, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods among you, as well as the Ashtoreths (their female counterparts), and commit your hearts to the Lord, and serve him only, and he will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines. This is the secret to revival in one verse, and suggests that at the same time Samuel was drinking very deeply from the wells of the Book of Deuteronomy, where the sin of idolatry was the chief sin of this book, which if not dealt with in a thorough fashion, would cause Israel to completely forfeit her standing before God, as well as the enjoyment of His blessings within the land. Further, this verse shows us what true repentance really means. In the end, it is something quite tangible, as well as measurable, and does not stop with tears and sorrow, but moves to concrete action, when Samuel says, "If you are returning to the Lord, then rid yourselves, or put away from yourselves, your foreign gods from among you, and then serve the Lord only, and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines. In other words, Israel must fully restore its calling and status before the Lord as His treasured possession, and as well as that of a kingdom of priests and holy nation, who stand exclusively in His presence, in order to be a blessing to the world (Exodus 19:5-6). That cannot possibly happen when there is a fascination with, as well as an active flirtation with, the idols of this world. This was a difficult repentance for the Israelites to make, because Canaanite religion exerted a powerful appeal with the sexual rites that were part of its worship, involving both Baal and his female counterpart Ashtoreth, if they wanted their crops to grow. This is why the Ashtoreths or female counterparts to Baal, are mentioned as well in Samuel's appeal. Finally in verse 4 the people heed Samuel's call, and actually turn from their national sins of idolatry, and give themselves to the Lord alone. Modern nations need to do the same. Perhaps the

national sins may not be the Baals and Ashtoreths mentioned here, but may be the sins of greed, technology, privilege, and power, that nations display toward each other today. Then Samuel gathered the people together at Mizpah for a kind of ritual confession before the Lord, where he also promised to intercede in prayer for them. How would Israel have responded to this promise at this point, with the Philistines breathing down their necks? We will soon find out as this story develops. The greatest gift that God can give His church and world today is the gift of prayer, and intercession. Does it excite us to know that Jesus ever lives, to make intercession for us, within the battle of life? (Romans 8:34). Recall Jesus' words to Peter: "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you like wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith might not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers (Luke 22:31-32). My daughter Cathy has a favourite book, and she has often urged me to read it. It is called "Rees Howells Intercessor" by Norman Grubb (1952). Amongst many other things, the prayers of this humble coal miner affected the course of World War II when Hitler was knocking on the doors of Europe and Britain. Indeed, as the poet Tennyson has said, "More things have been achieved by Prayer than this world can ever imagine." Finally, after receiving this promise from Samuel, the people began to draw precious water and poured it out before the Lord, perhaps relating to their fast which followed, or as a symbol of their cleansing from pollution caused by worshipping other gods. It may also have a link to David's later actions at 2 Samuel 23:14-17, where the pouring out of water symbolized a gift of deep gratitude for another's sacrificial actions. Finally this was followed by the confession that they had sinned against the Lord.

2. Secondly we discover the Experience of God's Mercy (verses 7-10)

When the Philistines heard that Israel was assembled at Mizpah, they thought that this would be a golden opportunity to destroy them completely. When the Israelites heard about this, they were afraid, and said to Samuel, "Do not stop crying out to the Lord our God for us, that He might rescue us from the Philistines" (verse 8). Then Samuel did something surprising. He took a suckling lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord, where perhaps a sin or guilt offering would have been more appropriate to this situation, although according to Leviticus 1:3-4 such an offering could also atone for sin. Perhaps this action may have also been intended as a counterpart to the peoples' precious offering of the pouring out of water before the Lord for their own sin. After Samuel made his offering, he cried out to the Lord on Israel's behalf, and the Lord answered him. The Lord responds to the cry of His people, going back to the exodus story (Exodus 2:23; 3:7). But God responds in His own time and way. And 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. Here the word for "panic" also describes what God had done to the Egyptians at the Red Sea (Exodus 14:24), and what he promises to do to all his enemies (1 Samuel 2:10). In contrast to 1 Samuel 4, where Israel went into battle against the Philistines on their own terms, and were soundly defeated, now here under Samuel, the Israelites go into battle, not with confident shouting, but with prayer and reverent worship of God, with the result of a decisive victory over the Philistines. Previously the people had their own plans, which they then asked God to bless, but Samuel would not act without first knowing what God desired. And perhaps God's response with his loud thunder can be seen as the Lord crying out in response to Samuel and the people, as well as letting the Philistines know who they were really dealing with, as Lord of Heaven and Earth. As the Prayer of Hannah finally concludes at 1 Samuel 2:9-10:- "It is not by strength that one prevails; those who oppose the Lord will be broken. The Most High will thunder from Heaven; the Lord will judge the ends of the earth." (End of quote). What a powerful weapon we have in

prayer. And in this way, Samuel can rightly join the prophets Elijah and Elisha in the books of Kings as the "horses and chariots" of Israel. In this respect, let us recall the words of Paul at 2 Corinthians 10:3-4 when he says, "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds." This we do through the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, as well through worship and prayer. As Samuel proved, these are more significant than political structures and strong military leadership.

3. Thirdly we discover the Memory of God's Mercy (verses 11-17)

In this final section, after the Philistines are routed and defeated, Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen as a memorial to the Lord's victory on this day. He called it "Ebenezer" meaning "stone/rock of help" - saying, "Thus far has the Lord helped us" (v.12). He did this to remind Israel that where human strength and planning had not succeeded, the Lord's help had. Perhaps this stone would also help to take away the trauma of the Lord's deserting his people at the place called Ebenezer back at 1 Samuel 4:1, when the Philistines inflicted great losses on the Israelites. This rock would also serve as a reminder of an important turning point in the life of Israel at this point, in which the Philistines were now subdued (v 13), and cities were restored to Israel (v.14). Further, Samuel continued in the role of a local circuit Judge, blessing the people of God (vv. 15-17).

Conclusion:-

From the beginning of Israel's crossing of the Jordan at Joshua 6:6, memorial stones served the important purpose of reminding future generations of God's intervention and goodness to them within the land. And God's rescues are something that He is likely to do again and again. That is why the stone called "Ebenezer" (or rock of help) can be of continual encouragement to us today. In the words of the hymn, "Come, Thou fount of every Blessing" the second verse begins: "Here I raise my Ebenezer; Hither by thy help I'm come; And I hope by thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home." Can we too raise our Ebenezer today, as a testimony of God's intervention and goodness in our lives, giving us victory beyond our own abilities, resources, and actions? From a personal point of view, we will never forget the blessing of this passage from 1 Samuel 7, connected with a holiday that we took in the January of 1990. As it was, we were headed for a place called Vincentia south of Nowra, where Jenny's friend lived. After experiencing a blocked radiator, and a replacement windscreen along the way, our holiday budget was completely blown by the time we arrived the following night at Vincentia. At that point I was feeling down in the dumps as they put it. The very next morning, our Bible Reading and devotion from our Scripture Union notes came from 1 Samuel 7:2-17, and was entitled "Ebenezer - Our Rock of help." Soon after the reading, we received an unexpected phone call from some old friends who lived at nearby Bomaderry, and managed a motel there. They rang to see whether we would like to go out on a days outing to Kangaroo Valley, with all of the trimmings tossed in for the children as well!! Soon a courtesy bus from the motel called at our house, and we were headed for a wonderful day out for the whole family, finishing with a marvellous barbeque meal at the end of the day! Truly at the end of the day, we could say with the Hymn-writer, Here I raise my Ebenezer, thus far, has the Lord helped us". May this story, be your story too, as we look to the Lord for His help in the many different challenges that life brings before us. Truly, the Lord is faithful - His mercies are new everyone morning. Great is His faithfulness! Amen.