

Hitherto

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[0 : 00] Well, if we could, with the Lord's help and the Lord's enabling this morning, we could turn back to that portion of Scripture that we read. 1 Samuel chapter 7.

We're continuing our study of 1 Samuel. And we've reached a wonderful chapter in the story of Samuel. A great verse in this chapter as well.

A well-known verse, verse 12. So we're looking at 1 Samuel chapter 7, page 230 in the Pew Bible. And our text is verse 12.

Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer. For he said, till now the Lord has helped us.

But of course, I love the way the authorized version puts it. Where it says, hitherto hath the Lord helped us. Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.

[1 : 08] Hitherto. How is your year going? How is your year going?

How has it been for you in 2024? As you know, we're all now into March. This is the first Lord's Day in the month of March.

So we are now into the third month of the year. But how is your year going so far? For some of us, 2024, it has brought joy.

The joy of a new birth. For some, the prospect of a newborn in the family. For others, there's the joy of a new build. We know people in the congregation, they're building a new house.

They have plans and prospects for making their own family home. Some others in the congregation, they're preparing for marriage. Where they will be newlyweds in the next couple of months.

[2 : 06] Others have been provided new work to extend and even to enjoy their career. Needless to say, for some, the start of 2024 has been very joyful.

It's brought joy. But as you know, for others, and myself included, 2024 has brought one of the many S's in our lives.

Sin, sickness, stress, suffering, sorrow, or separation. To the point that I'm sure that many of us can say that this year isn't going according to our perceived plan or purpose.

Because there have been many obstructions or obstacles or opposition from others. There have been barriers or breakups or breakdowns in relationships. There have been tumors and treatment and turmoil for family members.

There have been woes and worries and weaknesses, both within and without. And even though we're only in March, so far, for many people, for many people, 2024 has been a hard year.

[3 : 18] But, you know, as we come to this well-known passage this morning, we've been reminded that no matter what we're going through personally, or even publicly, we need to be brought to the same place as Samuel.

Where we can say with Samuel, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us. Hitherto hath the Lord helped us. And as I said, I love the way the authorized version puts it.

There's something so, because there's something so beautiful about the word, Hitherto. Hitherto hath the Lord helped us. And of course, it's an old English word. It means, as it says in the ESV, until now or thus far.

But I love hitherto. Hitherto hath the Lord helped us. Because whatever you and I are going through in our lives, we've been reminded that we need to be brought to the same place as Samuel this morning, where we can say with Samuel, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.

And in this passage, we see three different places. Three different places that remind us about the importance of hitherto. We see, first of all, a place of repentance.

[4 : 29] Then we'll see a place of redemption. Then there's a place of remembrance. A place of repentance, a place of redemption, and a place of remembrance. Three different places.

So that's where we're going this morning, to three different places. First of all, we see a place of repentance. A place of repentance. Look at verse 1 of chapter 7.

The men of Kiriath-Jerim came and took up the ark of the Lord and brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill. And they consecrated his son Eleazar to have charge of the ark of the Lord. From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-Jerim, a long time passed, some twenty years. And all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord. And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashteroth from among you and direct your heart to the Lord and serve Him only.

And He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines. As you know, the story of salvation in the book of Samuel, it's part of a bigger story of salvation in the Bible.

[5 : 43] It's part of a larger and longer narrative. It's part of this perfectly planned history of God's salvation. And as we often say, history is His story.

It's God's story. It's God's perfectly planned and purpose story of salvation. But where Samuel fits into the story of salvation is, as you know, the whole emphasis of the book of Samuel is that there was no king in Israel.

Everyone was doing what's right in their own eyes. Therefore, Israel needed a king. And that king was ultimately going to be King David. Because King David, he is the promised seed, son, and saviour of the people of Israel.

But King David himself, he's also to be seen as a pointer and a preparation for the greater king and the greater seed, son, and saviour of sinners, who is the Lord Jesus Christ.

And, you know, we see that as we follow the story through the book of Samuel. We see this story of salvation unfolding. Because we saw in chapters 1 and 2, they set the scene.

[6 : 49] They introduce us to this young man, Samuel. He's the son of a prayerful mother called Hannah. Then in chapter 3, Samuel is called to be a prophet.

He's to faithfully and fearlessly preach and proclaim the Lord's message. And the message that he's been given is a message of defeat, disaster, and death. What a message to give.

A message of defeat, disaster, and death, which happened in chapter 4. The Israelites are defeated by the Philistines. The Ark of the Covenant is captured by the Philistines, which is a disaster.

And there's 34,000 soldiers killed on the battlefield. They die. There's death. It's a message of defeat, disaster, and death. But the messy situation only gets worse.

It gets worse when a dying mother giving birth to her son. She gives a dying message about her son. Call his name Ichabod because the glory has now departed.

[7 : 50] Call his name Ichabod because the glory has departed. Then in chapter 5, you follow the narrative. The glory has departed. It's gone first of all to Ashdod, to the city of the Philistines.

And it's there that the Philistines, they ridicule, they refuse, they reject the Lord. And you think, surely they would repent, but instead of repenting of their sin and returning to the Lord, the Philistines, they see the power of the Lord and they just push him away.

They push him away. They send the Ark of the Covenant to other Philistine cities. First to Gath and then on to Ekron. But then after seven months of misery where the Lord has brought tumors and turmoil upon the Philistines, in chapter 6, the Philistines, they finally make the move to take the Ark of the Covenant and return to Zenda.

And this is where we're picking up the story of salvation in the book of Samuel. Because by the time we come to this chapter, the Ark of the Covenant has been returned to the Israelites.

It's now located in this unusual place with an unusual name. As we read there in verses 1 and 2, it's called Kiriath-Jerim. And as we read, the Ark of the Covenant has been at Kiriath-Jerim for nearly 20 years.

[9 : 09] It's been there for 20 years. It might seem strange to us that such a hallowed and holy item of furniture that was once sitting in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle, we might think, well, why has it been neglected for so long?

Why has it been sitting in Kiriath-Jerim for the past 20 years? But it only shows and highlights the spiritual temperature of the people.

Because even though the Israelites had the Ark of the Covenant, they had the Ark of the Covenant back in their possession, they still weren't committed to the Lord. They still weren't committed to the Lord.

That's what we see here. Because we read that for 20 years. And that should be emphasized. You could underline it in your Bible. For 20 years, Samuel has faithfully preached to the people of Israel. For 20 years, Samuel has fearlessly proclaimed that the Lord was present amongst his people. For 20 years, Samuel, you could say he's firmly presented the message of salvation to this people. [10:13] And for 20 years, he has served them faithfully. But during those 20 years, we see that the people, they've grown cold. They've grown casual.

And they're complacent towards the Lord. During those 20 years, you could say that the people have digressed and deviated. And even drifted in their commitment to the Lord. During those 20 years, the people, they have fallen away.

They've lost sight. They've not focused and fixated themselves on the Lord as they should. But when we read that after 20 years of faithfully preaching and fearlessly proclaiming and firmly presenting the truth of God's Word, we read there at the end of verse 2 that the people of Israel, they finally were finally brought to a place of repentance.

Where they lamented after the Lord. And you know, you look at it.

20 years a long time. It reminds me of how hard the human heart can be. how hard the human heart can be.

[11:32] Because like it was in Samuel's day, you know, we can listen, and you do listen. You have listened to different preachers faithfully preaching, fearlessly proclaiming, and firmly presenting the truth of God's Word for years.

More than 20 years. But you're doing nothing with it. Or what you're doing with it isn't having a transforming effect on your life.

Because despite hearing the call to come to Christ for salvation, or even the call to serve in the church of Jesus Christ, instead of stepping up, we step back.

We stand back. We sit back. And we do that because, well, we have everything we want. And we have it the way we want it. We have our ark.

We have our holy and hallowed item of furniture. We have the ark of the covenant. It's now back in our possession. We've put it into position. We've got our pulpit filled. We've got our preacher preaching.

[12:36] We've got our psalms sung. We have our church cozy. But as it was in Samuel's day, where's the commitment? Where's the commitment to the Lord?

What's the spiritual temperature of the people? Is it growing cold and casual and complacent towards the Lord? And you know, this is why the people of Israel, they were brought to this place, a place of repentance.

Because what they needed, and what we see happening, is that they needed a genuine and godly repentance. They needed a genuine and godly repentance. And you follow the narrative through chapter 7, and you see that when Samuel spoke to the people in verse 3, we have to realize that Samuel hasn't spoken in the story since chapter 3.

He never spoke in chapter 4, or chapter 5, or chapter 6. He's been silent. He hasn't said a word. But when Samuel spoke in chapter 3, the first thing he does, he calls and commands the people to turn away from their sin, and to turn away from their slumber, and to turn away from their slothfulness, and to turn away from their shallowness, and turn back to the Lord.

You read verse 3. Samuel, first time he speaks in three chapters, he said to all the house of Israel, If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the ashteroth from among you, and direct your heart to the Lord, and serve Him only, and He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.

[14:20] Samuel spoke to the people, and you know what he said? Remove your idols. Repent of your idolatry, and return to the Lord.

Remove your idols. Repent of your idolatry, and return to the Lord. As you know, I love alliteration. It's how my mind works. Remove, repent, return.

Remove, repent, return. Remove your idols. Repent of your idolatry. Return to the Lord. Remove, repent, return. And we see that the people responded. They responded. They resolved to removing their idols, repenting of their idolatry, and returning to the Lord.

And you know, whether you're a Christian or not this morning, this is something we all need to do. Myself included. We all need to remove our idols. Those idols that we put, and we place as number one in our life, before God.

We need to remove those idols. We need to take them down. We need to destroy them. And we need to replace, and we need to reposition God as number one in our life.

[15:29] Because the first commandment reminds us, it's number one because God needs to be number one. We need to remove our idols. But not only remove them, we need to repent of our idolatry.

We need to say sorry to God. Because sorry is the hardest word to say. We need to say sorry for our sin of idolatry. Sorry for not putting and placing and positioning and prioritizing God in our life as first and foremost.

We need to remove our idols and repent of our idolatry. And as Samuel says, return to the Lord. If you are returning to the Lord, Samuel says, return to the Lord with all your heart.

Not some of it. Not a bit of it. But all of it. All your heart. Return to the Lord with wholehearted commitment.

Remove. Repent. Return. Remove. Repent. Return. You know, William Cowper, a famous hymn writer, he expressed and explained the importance of being brought to this place of repentance.

[16:48] He had this wonderful hymn called, Oh, for a closer walk with God. And this is what he wrote. He wrote, Oh, for a closer walk with God, a calm and heavenly frame, a light to shine upon the road that leads me to the Lamb.

Where is the blessedness I knew when first I sought the Lord? Where is the soul refreshing view of Jesus and his word? Return, he says.

Return, oh holy dove. Return. Sweet messenger of rest. I hate the sins that made thee mourn and drove thee from my breast. Then he prays, The dearest idol I have known, whatever that idol be, help me to tear it from thy throne and worship only thee.

So shall my walk be close with God, calm and serene my frame, so pureer light shall mark the road that leads me to the Lamb.

It's a wonderful reminder to us that we need to remove our idols. We need to repent of our idolatry. We need to return to walk with the Lord in wholehearted commitment.

[18:01] Because, you know, we see here that when the people responded in repentance, they were brought to a place of redemption. That's what we see secondly. A place of redemption.

So a place of repentance and then secondly a place of redemption. Look at verse 4. So the people of Israel, what did they do? They put away the Baals and the Ashtaroath and they served the Lord only.

Then Samuel said, Gather all Israel at Mizpan. I will pray to the Lord for you. So they gathered at Mizpan, 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 Mizpan.

Now when it comes to repentance and redemption, you could say that they're like two inseparable twins. You can't have one without the other. You can't have redemption without repentance.

And as you know, that's the biblical emphasis. Repentance and redemption, they go hand in hand throughout the Bible. Throughout the whole of the Old Testament, the message of the prophets repeatedly is, Thus saith the Lord, Repent and turn from your idols.

[19:14] Then you come to the New Testament and you have John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. He preaches and proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Then you follow Jesus in the pages of Scripture.

We read there that his first words recorded in the Gospels are, Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel. For unless you repent, you shall all likewise perish.

And so when the church is birthed in the book of Acts, the Apostle Peter, he begins by preaching about repentance. On the day of Pentecost, his ministry and his message is repent and be baptized.

Every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. And Peter, he goes on to proclaim and he says those wonderful words in Acts chapter 3, Repent ye therefore and be converted that your sins may be blotted out.

Repent ye therefore and be converted that your sins may be blotted out. You know, you look at the whole of the Bible. God's pure word to us and we see that repentance and redemption, they go hand in hand.

[20:31] They're like inseparable twins. You can't have one without the other. But you know, like the beautiful word that I love called the word hitherto, I also love the word repent.

I love the word repent. We don't hear a lot about repentance in churches today, probably because we don't hear a lot about sin. But people need to repent. That's the call of the Gospel. They need to repent. The word repent literally means to change your mind. To change your mind. The word convert or conversion, we speak about conversion, that's a change of direction. Therefore, to repent and to be converted, as Peter proclaimed in Acts 3, it's to change your mind all the way around and then to change your motion all the way around. You're to change your mind, you're to change your motion. Where we're no longer facing and focusing upon sin. We've changed our mind, we've changed our motion, and we're facing and focusing upon salvation.

[21 : 38] Salvation through Jesus Christ, our Savior. And that's what we've been shown here in this place of redemption. Because when the people of Israel, when they resolve to remove their idols and repent of their idolatry and return to the Lord, we see there that there's confession of sin.

They openly and honestly confess their sin. They confess there, we have sinned against the Lord. We have sinned, verse 6, we have sinned against the Lord.

But there's not only confession, there's also intercession. Because we read on in verse 8, the people 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.

So Samuel took a sucking lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. And Samuel cried out to the Lord for Israel. And the Lord answered him.

You know, the people, they asked their preacher, they asked their preacher and said to him, Pray for me. Pray for me that I'll be saved. I wonder if you ever ask anybody, Pray for me, so I'll be saved.

[22 : 52] There's confession of sin, but there's also intercession. And there's intercession, and when there's intercession, when people are praying here, when Samuel's praying, we see that there's victory and there's vindication over the enemy through the precious blood of a lamb.

There's victory and vindication over the enemy through the precious blood of a lamb, which, as you can see there, in 1 Samuel 7, hidden in the pages of the Old Testament, here is a preparation for us.

Here is a pointer to the cross of Jesus Christ. Here we're being shown from Samuel. We're being shown the cross. We're being told that Jesus is the Lamb of God who will one day come to take away the sin of the world.

And He will come because without the shedding of His blood, there is no forgiveness of sin. Without the shedding of His blood, there is no forgiveness of sin.

And you know, this is where the Philistines went wrong in the previous chapter. You remember in the previous chapter, the Philistines thought that by giving all these golden guilt offerings, these tumors and mice of gold, that that would be enough to save them.

[24 : 09] But it wasn't. It wasn't. And it wasn't because, as Samuel shows us here, without the shedding of blood, there's no forgiveness of sin. And how often we can think the same.

We can think that our golden gift offerings, our golden guilt offerings of church attendance, that eases the guilt a wee bit coming to church. Or our golden guilt offering of reading the Bible.

That'll ease the conscience for a few hours. The golden guilt offering while I prayed today. I tithed. I served. You know, sometimes we can convince ourselves, that's enough.

That's enough to save me. But it's not. And it's not because the Bible is clear. Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin.

That's why the question was asked, what can wash away my sin? What can make me whole again? Nothing. Absolutely nothing but the blood of Jesus.

[25 : 22] My friend, like the people of Israel, we need to be brought to a place of redemption through the blood of the Lamb. Through the blood of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. And that's why Peter proclaimed on the day of Pentecost, repent and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out by the precious blood of the Lamb.

And so in this passage, we see three different places. We see a place of repentance. Then they're brought to a place of redemption. And then lastly and briefly, a place of remembrance.

A place of remembrance. So a place of redemption, a place of repentance, redemption, and remembrance. So a place of remembrance. Look at verse 12. Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer.

For he said, till now the Lord has helped us. As I said, I love the way the authorized version puts it. Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.

You know, every time I come to this passage in the Bible, I'm reminded, and I've told you this before, reminded of that single, small, single standing stone at the side of the road in the village of Shieldanish in South Lochs.

[26 : 43] I've mentioned it to you before. If you haven't gone to see it yet, shame on you. You should go and see it. Because when you drive through Belala and then you take that left off the main road and you're heading through South Lochs, you pass the Loch Erisordyn or the Cleicher Hotel as it was previously known, and then just about 50 yards after it, you'll see this small, single standing stone at the side of the road in the village of Shieldanish.

And for most people, they zoom past it. They fly past the stone and it goes unnoticed and it remains, for many people, unimportant. But with many things in life, there's a story behind why it's there.

There's a story behind that small, single standing stone at the side of the road in Shieldanish. It wasn't put up during the Bronze Age. As I told you before, it was erected in the 1980s.

A man called Donald Murdo Ferguson, still living. He's an elder in the Church of Scotland in Kinloch and he had been working on the new road in South Lochs in the 1980s when he found the stone. And with the permission of the council, he put up the stone, the single, standing stone at the side of the road in Shieldanish and he put a plaque on the stone. What did he put on it?

[28 : 03] Ebenezer. Hitherto hath the Lord helped us. Hitherto hath the Lord helped us. Now over 40 years later, Donald Murdo, I think he's nearly 102 and the sign, as you'd expect, 40 years have gone by.

The sign has corroded and it's fallen off. But amazingly, the single standing stone at the side of the road in Shieldanish, it's still there. Still there to be seen.

Still standing as a testimony to the Lord's faithfulness. And you know, for Samuel, that's what this, his single standing stone was about too.

Because Samuel set up his single standing stone as a place, in a place of remembrance. A place that would remind and reassure the people that after many fallouts and many fights with the Philistines, the Lord was faithful.

The Lord was faithful. And with this, I'll conclude this morning because Samuel, he named his single standing stone, we're told there, he called its name Ebenezer.

[29 : 14] Ebenezer, which means stone of help. Stone of help. And yet, Ebenezer was the name of the place where the Philistines had fought and where the Israelites had lost the Ark of the Covenant.

You go back to chapter 4, we read there that it's at Ebenezer that everything ended in defeat, disaster, and death. It was at Ebenezer, the place called the stone of help.

It was, that was the place where the Israelites were made to realize how helpless and how hopeless they really are without the Lord. That's what they were made to see.

They were made to see how weak they are, how frail they are without the Lord. That was the place. Ebenezer was the place where they were made to see how helpless and hopeless they are without the Lord.

And that's why I asked earlier, how is your year going? How has it been for you in 2024? Because with many of the painful providences we go through in life, we're often brought to that battlefield.

[30 : 29] We're brought to the place of remembrance and realization of just how helpless and hopeless we are without the Lord. We're brought to see how weak and how vulnerable and how frail we are without the Lord.

And you know, it's in those times of doubt and despair, do you know what we discover? The Lord's grace is always sufficient and His strength is made perfect in our weakness.

Ebenezer, hitherto hath the Lord helped us. And you know, my friend, however your year is going or whatever you and I are going through, whatever you think this year will have for you, we're being reminded that we need to be brought to the same place as Samuel, a place of repentance, a place of redemption and a place also of remembrance because it's a place where we can stop and say, hitherto, hitherto hath the Lord helped us.

I hope that we will all leave here today echoing the words of Samuel saying, hitherto hath the Lord helped us.

May the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray. O Lord, our gracious God, we give thanks to Thee for Thy Word that it really is pure and it really does speak and it speaks to us sometimes when we need it most, when we're not aware of it.

[32 : 22] The Lord is speaking and He is speaking to us powerfully and He is speaking to us personally and help us to see that there are a God who does not look upon us in wrath and hate but a God who looks upon us in mercy and in grace and in love.

He looks upon us through the eyes of His Son, the Lord Jesus and help us then we pray to come to Him and to keep coming to Him to keep coming to these places of repentance and redemption and even remembrance and that today we would all remember that whatever we are going through, whatever is in our cup, whatever providence brings us pain, that hitherto, hitherto, hath the Lord helped us and His promise remains true that He will continue to help us from this time forth and even forevermore.

Keep us then we pray by Thy grace go before us day by day we ask for we ask it in Jesus' name and for His sake. Amen. We're going to bring our service to a conclusion this morning.

We're going to sing the words of Psalm 121. Psalm 121 is in the Scottish Psalter. Reminder, there's tea and coffee after the service if you want to stay behind.

You're warmly invited to do so. Psalm 121 page 416 in the Scottish Psalter. We're singing the whole psalm. Like Psalm 46, a very familiar psalm.

[34 : 12] A psalm we often sing when we need help. We often sing these psalms at funerals. Psalm 46. And 121. Because we need to be reminded that the Lord is our helper.

And that's what the psalmist says here. It's the keeper's psalm. But he says, I to the hills will lift mine eyes. From whence doth come my need?

Where does my help come from, he says? My help, my safety cometh from the Lord who heaven and earth hath made. We'll sing the whole psalm.

Let's stand to sing if you're able to God's praise. I to the hills where lift mine eyes from west hath come my need.

My safety cometh from the Lord who heaven under the head.

[35 : 28] be with heaven and Houli in the nytt family Behold he that keeps his tire, he slumbers not nor sleeps.

The Lord thee keeps, the Lord I cheat, on thy white and dust day.

The wind by night they shall not spite, nor yet the sun by day.

The Lord shall keep thy soul, he shall preserve thee from all hell.

And for thy going out an end, God ye forever will.

[37 : 13] The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forevermore. Amen.