

VICTORY AT MIZPAH – 1 Sam. 6:13-7:13

From Ichabod to Ebenezer #3

Indiana University of Pennsylvania was a small school that wanted to enlarge its student body. Constantly living in the shadow of the Big Ten Indiana University, IUP suffered from an inferiority complex. It's big break came in a strange way. Lisa Birnback published an article in which she alleged that IUP had the ugliest male student body in the nation. At first, this unwanted and undesired attention seemed to be the last thing that IUP needed – just more fuel to add to an already enormous inferiority complex. But then it suddenly dawned on some of the male student body leaders. They had finally found an identity. They scheduled and promoted an ugly man contest. T shirts were printed to be worn by men with the lettering *IUP Men – the few, the proud, the ugly*. Soon their story was being picked up and promoted in many places. Even the New York Times and the Washington Post carried stories about IUP and the student reaction to the ugly allegation. The next year, the freshman class showed a marked increase over the previous year, and it wasn't too long before IUP experienced record enrollment. And it all happened because the school was able to take what most would consider to be a defeat and turn it around into a victory.

I think we would all agree that being listed first on an ugly list would not be the goal of most people. It ranks right up there with the klutz list and the stupid list. But those who become successful seem to have the knack of turning defeats into victories, while the Charlie Brown's of life seem to be able to snatch defeat out of the jaws of victory every time.

During these past 3 Sunday mornings, we have been looking at one of the lowest periods in the life of the nation of Israel. This time came at the end of the period that we name after the Judges who periodically brought deliverance from oppression to God's people. And the lowest of the low time came when the army foolishly endangered the Ark of the Covenant and lost it for a 7 month period to the enemy Philistines. The capture of the ark was punctuated by Phineas' wife giving birth to a child whom she named Ichabod – no glory. *The glory of God has departed from Israel*, she said. This low period ended with Samuel leading the Israeli army in a victory at Mizpah. Samuel then set up a monument which he called Ebenezer – the stone of Divine help. In contrast to Phineas' wife, Samuel was able to say, *Thus far the Lord has helped us*. We have already looked at the Philistines capturing the Ark and God's defending of Himself while the ark was in enemy hands. Now let's read together about the Ark being restored to God's people ending with this great victory over the Philistines at Mizpah. We pick up the story in 1 Samuel 6:13 after the new cart drawn by 2 cows who had never been yoked before brought the Ark of the Covenant safely back into Israelite territory.

READ 1 Samuel 6:13-7:13:

1SA 6:13 Now the people of Beth Shemesh were harvesting their wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they rejoiced at the sight. ¹⁴ The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and there it stopped beside a large rock. The people chopped up the wood of the cart and sacrificed the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. ¹⁵ The Levites took down the ark of the LORD, together with the chest containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. On that day the people of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the LORD. ¹⁶ The five rulers of the Philistines saw all this and then returned that same day to Ekron.

1SA 6:17 These are the gold tumors the Philistines sent as a guilt offering to the LORD--one each for Ashdod, Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron. ¹⁸ And the number of the gold rats was according to the number of Philistine towns belonging to the five rulers--the fortified towns with their country villages. The large rock, on which they set the ark of the LORD, is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh.

1SA 6:19 But God struck down some of the men of Beth Shemesh, putting seventy of them to death because they had looked into the ark of the LORD. The people mourned because of the heavy blow the LORD had dealt them, ²⁰ and the men of Beth Shemesh asked, "Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God? To whom will the ark go up from here?"

1SA 6:21 Then they sent messengers to the people of Kiriath Jearim, saying, "The Philistines have returned the ark of the LORD. Come down and take it up to your place." ¹ So the men of Kiriath Jearim came and took up the ark of the LORD. They took it to Abinadab's house on the hill and consecrated Eleazar his son to guard the ark of the LORD.

1SA 7:2 It was a long time, twenty years in all, that the ark remained at Kiriath Jearim, and all the people of Israel mourned and sought after the LORD. ³ And Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, "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." ⁴ So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only.

1SA 7:5 Then Samuel said, "Assemble all Israel at Mizpah and I will intercede with the LORD for you." ⁶ 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." And Samuel was leader of Israel at Mizpah.

1SA 7:7 When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled at Mizpah, the rulers of the Philistines came up to attack them. And when the Israelites heard of it, they were afraid because of the Philistines. ⁸ 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." ⁹ Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. He cried out to the LORD on Israel's behalf, and the LORD answered him.

1SA 7:10 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. ¹¹ The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth Car.

1SA 7:12 Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far has the LORD helped us." ¹³ So the Philistines were subdued and did not invade Israelite territory again. Throughout Samuel's lifetime, the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines.

Now the conclusion of our story falls into 3 major sections:

*First, we have the joyous reception of the Ark back into Israelite hands.

*Second, we have the spiritual revival that took place among the people

*Finally, we have the miraculous rout over the Philistines at Mizpah.

Let's look at these 3 sections together.

THE JOYOUS RECEPTION OF THE ARK BACK INTO ISRAELI HANDS:

Imagine the pleasant surprise that those farmers from Beth Shemesh had when they saw the ark being pulled by those 2 cows coming into their tiny town. They had never dreamed this to be a possibility. The Philistines were still in control. They were harvesting their wheat in fear of the Philistines coming upon them at any time. But now miraculously, the ark was back in their hands again. What joy this must have brought to their hearts. No wonder they immediately sacrificed the cows using the wood of the cart for the fire as an offering to the Lord for His goodness to them.

But it wasn't long before the newness of the situation wore off. It wasn't long before the joy of the miracle that had taken place diminished. It wasn't long before the ark of the covenant being with them became old news. And curiosity began to set in. They lost the wonder of the ark and began to want to look inside of it. Now we can understand some of their curiosity. After all, the ark was housed in the holy of holies where no one but the High Priest could ever lay eyes on it. I'm sure many of the people, even some of the priests, often talked about what it looked like – this box overlaid with gold that God had chosen to be the

home of His presence. In the ark were 3 invaluable articles: the stone tablets of the law that God had engraved on Mt. Sinai, the almond rod of Aaron that had miraculously budded and produced almonds even though it had been severed from its tree and a bowl of manna that God had miraculously supplied every single day in the wilderness during those 40 years of wandering. These people had only heard of these stories from the past. So curiosity set in to actually see these artifacts of Israel's history. But God was not pleased with their curious probing of the Ark, was He? And the 70 that had dared to look into the Ark were struck dead by Him.

It is interesting to note by comparison that none of the Philistines that we know of were struck dead for handling the Ark. Many of them suffered in the plague that God brought upon them for taking the Ark in the first place. But they were not struck down for placing the Ark on the cart and returning it to the Israelites. But these Israelites who looked into the Ark were struck down. And later, a man named Uzzah who reached out to steady the Ark, touching it, would be struck down as David was trying to bring the Ark into Jerusalem. It is clear that God had a different standard for His people who had received His revelation and should have known how to treat and handle the Ark than He did for the pagan Philistines who just didn't know any better.

God's oversight of His ark reminds us of the necessity of knowing His Word and not allowing His sacred holiness to become mundane with familiarity. God has revealed His truth and His will for us in His word. We are responsible to know it. Part of God's revelation concerns His holiness and glory. In His mercy, God has allowed us to have certain ceremonies in life that allow us to meet Him in a special way. The ordinance of communion that we have just observed this morning is an example of one of these. We should never lose the specialness of these times. It is so easy to begin to take them for granted and allow familiarity to rob them of their special nature. But this is not pleasing to God.

BUT NOTICE WITH ME NOW THE REVIVAL THAT THEN TOOK PLACE AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE:

This low point in history brought the people to an awareness of their sinful condition. As they experienced God's lack of blessing upon them, they began to ask themselves why all of these tragedies were happening. This brought them to an awareness of how they had displeased God by their continuous transgression of His commandments. Samuel helped them to realize this by admonishing them to get rid of the false idols that had crept into their lives.

Now we can see how easily this process might have occurred with the Israelites. Living in an agricultural society, certain natural elements were critical to their survival. They needed rain to germinate the seed and nourish the crops. They needed freedom from pestilence which could destroy a whole harvest. The surrounding pagan nations had gods which they claimed helped them in these areas. And these gods seemed to be doing a good job for these people – after all the Philistines were stronger than the Israelites at this time.

Baal was the god of the storm – he controlled the rains which were indispensable to their continued existence. Astoreth was Baal’s wife. She was associated with fertility which was critically important in the family life and the economic life with the births of children and the harvesting of the crops. It is easy to see how in time these pagan gods could worm their ways into the lives of the people of God because they addressed areas of such critical importance to their prosperity and wellbeing.

But God had given clear instructions in His Word not to have any gods before Him and not to make an idol of any deity. So the children of Israel had put themselves into a vicious, downward spiral. Their accepting the pagan gods of the surrounding nations brought upon them God’s displeasure and chastening hand which was usually seen in oppression and poor harvests. But as the Israelites were being oppressed and suffering from poor harvests, they would often look at the stronger surrounding nations who seemed to be so much more prosperous and covet their lifestyles and gods more. This cycle had to be broken. So as the Israelites reached the bottom, they began to listen to Samuel’s warnings and instructions from God’s Word. They were then led to a new commitment to God. This new commitment involved getting rid of the foreign gods and trusting in Jehovah alone for their deliverance. It was this spiritual revival that put them in a place where God could bless them once again, bringing divine deliverance to them.

We must always remember the dangers of trusting in pagan gods. Just because the pagan gods of America are not idols carved out of stone or wood doesn’t mean that they are less dangerous to the spiritual lives of God’s people. Many Americans today trust in their material prosperity or in the government or in personal relationships that they have for their security and wellbeing. Now there is nothing inherently wrong with any of these any more than there was something inherently wrong with rain or fertility during these O.T. times. But the God of the Bible remains the same – He still wants no other gods before Him in our lives. We must trust in Him alone for our salvation and deliverance if we are to be pleasing to Him.

FINALLY, NOTE THE MIRACULOUS ROUT THAT GOD GAVE TO HIS PEOPLE:

The Philistines were just as strong as ever – in fact they were stronger now than they were 20 years before. And at that time they have been strong enough to completely defeat the Israelites and capture the Ark of the Covenant. But at that time, the Israelites were fighting in their own strength. Now God was going to fight for them. And the Philistines and their gods were no match for Jehovah. God threw the Philistines into such panic that they were routed in front of the Israelites. Finally, God’s people would have a measure of relief from their oppressors.

Now this relief would not last long. It would not last long because the revival would soon wear off. In very short order, the Israelites would be crying out to Samuel to give them a king so that they could be like the other nations. It would only be when David, a man after God’s own heart, would assume the throne that the

Philistines would finally be subdued because David would lead the nation in a godly direction for a long period of time. But relief did come as the people confessed their sins, repented of them and turned their trust and hope to God alone. So one of the darkest periods in Israel's history would end – the time from Ihabod to Ebenezer, the time when the Ark of the Covenant went into exile.

We often hear the saying; *those who refuse to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.* We are wise if we learn from the mistakes that God's people made in olden times. That is the reason these stories have been recorded for us. The Apostle Paul, after recalling some of the O.T. wilderness stories, wrote to the church at Corinth, "Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were."

No matter how tempting it is, no matter how much it appears to make sense, no matter how attractive the enemy makes it appear, it is never wise to trust in the flesh and follow the gods of the world. This path only leads to self-destruction. We must trust in the Lord alone. And we should pray for revival in our nation so that we might be able to experience the blessings that God would love to pour out upon us.

The year that Rockford Baptist Church was founded was right in the middle of a low time in our nation's history. Our country was divided over the slavery issue – in just 3 years our nation would be in civil war, the north fighting against the south, families divided against one another. And economically, our nation was in the midst of a depression. Many factories had stopped production, unemployment was high, the future looked bleak. It was on one of those gloomy days in 1857 that a New York City clerk named Jeremiah Lanthier decided to start a prayer meeting during his lunch hour. He passed the word of this prayer meeting throughout his downtown office building. With high hopes, he set up 20 chairs in a circle, but nobody came – not one soul. So Jeremiah spent his lunch hour in prayer all by himself. And he prepared to do the same the next day. Happily, somebody joined him for prayer that next day. More people came in the days that followed until all 20 chairs were eventually filled. It wasn't too long before another prayer meeting was started on Wall Street and then on Williams Street and Broadway. Those office prayer meetings during the lunch hour eventually spread like wildfire throughout the cities of our nation. Many Christian historians today credit that informal prayer movement with giving our country the spiritual strength that it needed to survive the atrocities of the civil war.

While technologies rapidly change, human nature hasn't changed much down through the years, has it? Like the Israelites of old, we still have a tendency to trust in false gods for security. Sometimes, it is only when these gods fail us miserably that we realize the error of our ways and return our faith fully back to the true and living God. It is at these times that we know the joy and peace of moving from Ihabod to Ebenezer in our lives.