

SEEING THE HANDS OF PROVIDENCE IN OUR LIVES

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Lesson: I Samuel 7

We are not permitted to know the future, but it is allowable and useful to cast our minds back to past events. We may do this in the course of self-examination with a view to genuine repentance. Or we may recall the past as a means of seeing the hands of the Lord's Providence over our lives. Indeed, we cannot see Providence in any other way, because it is a law that none can see the Lord's Providence face to face but only in retrospect. This explains why Samuel said: "Thus far the Lord has helped us"—that is to say, He has helped us up to the present time. This does not mean that He will cease to help us, but merely that we can never know in what way that help will come. And so long as our thoughts are marked with a memorial of His perpetual and infinite care, we need never be anxious or afraid.

While Samuel was still a boy the Lord brought judgment on Eli and his house. There was a battle between the children of Israel and the Philistines. The Israelites were driven back and 4000 men were slain in the field. The elders of the people suggested that they "bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord from Shiloh to us" (I Sam. 4:3), thinking that it would save them from their enemies. "And when the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel shouted so loudly that the earth shook" (I Sam. 4:5). The Philistines, thinking that their position was now hopeless, fought fiercely, and drove the children of Israel back. Chief among their spoils was the ark of God. A messenger came to Shiloh, grieving. He carried the news to Eli, the priest,: "Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has been also a great slaughter among the people. Also, your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas are dead, and the ark of God has been captured" (I Sam. 4:17). "Then it happened, when he made mention of the ark of God, that Eli fell off the seat backward by the side of the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years" (I Sam. 4:18).

Although the ark had not saved the children of Israel, it was a curse to the Philistines. After only a few months they returned it on a new cart drawn by two milk cows. It stayed for a while in Bethshemesh, but because the people of Bethshemesh looked into the ark many were slain, and they requested that the people of Kirjathjearim come to fetch it. The ark stayed in the house of Abinadab for 20 years.

The Israelites no doubt marveled that the sacred ark of the Lord did not save them from defeat, and even more that it was taken into the camp of their

enemies, into the very house of their gods. Perhaps it did not occur to them that the Ten Commandments, which were carried in the ark, had no power except with those who loved and obeyed them. The really popular religion of Israel at that time was the worship of Baal and Ashtaroath. This they had adopted from the nations around them, preferring these sensual and worldly gods to the worship of the Lord Himself. In spirit the ark had departed from them long before, and they had fallen into the evils of faith alone represented by the Philistines. It was for this reason that the Lord suffered them to be taken captive by the Philistines, and allowed the most holy object of their worship to be taken from them.

Samuel knew that this was the cause of their defeat, and so he spake to them saying, "If you return to the Lord with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and Ashtaroath from among you, and prepare your hearts for the Lord, and serve Him only; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines" (I Sam. 7:3). The people responded to his words, and so he called them together to Mizpeh for fasting and confession of their sins. No sooner had they begun to gather than the Philistines suspected that their vassals, the Israelites, were about to rise up against them, and so they prepared an army to take them. When the people heard of it, they were afraid and they 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" (I Sam. 7:8).

These words of humble petition were very far removed from their state of exaltation and pride when they summoned the ark from Shiloh to join them on the battlefield, and when the whole camp of Israel rang with their shouts as the ark appeared. For then they called on the Lord only when the battle was obviously going against them, and with the false hope that the mere presence of the ark would save them regardless of their state at the time. On this occasion they had been prepared by repentance and a humble turning to the Lord. They called on the Lord Himself, not in command, but in prayer. And the Lord heard them. He sent thunder against the Philistines, and in the battle that ensued, the Philistines suffered the worst defeat they had ever faced from the hands of Israel. It was then that Samuel took a stone and set it between Mizpeh and Shen and called the name of it "Ebenezer" saying, "Thus far the Lord has helped us."

Ebenezer means "The stone of Help" thus the Lord Himself Who is the rock of our salvation. And when he said, "thus far the Lord has helped us," he included the times of defeat as well as those of victory. For it was plain that the Lord's loving Providence never ceased to care for them—that He constantly led them according to their spiritual needs, and blessed them in their trials as well as in their rejoicing.

We too may reflect on the ways in which the Lord has protected, guided us, and brought us as much as possible closer to our heavenly home. We too may see

His hand more clearly in disappointment than in apparent success. We too may acknowledge that He leads and protects through the Word—not as a forgotten talisman in the memory, but through the Word as understood and loved.

Although there are many things in our life that we cannot understand even sometimes long after the event, the general principle remains clear—the Lord allows us to be defeated only by our own internal weaknesses, and He permits this, not for the sake of our destruction, but rather to open our eyes to the evils which we must shun if His Divine qualities are to find a resting place in our hearts. And when we seem to find a blessing, and our hearts are warm with rejoicing over success, let us remember that the victory and the blessing are the Lord's, who alone is good, and who alone is victorious over forces of hell. It is this recognition that enables us to erect a similar memorial in our own hearts—"Thus far the Lord has helped us" (I Samuel 12). *Amen.*