

# 1 Samuel 7

Intro Help for the Helpless June 8, 2008

Now that women have solidly earned their place in the work force, many find themselves still yearning for something men often have: wives. So says the New York Times.<sup>1</sup> Just ask Joyce Lustbader, a research scientist at Columbia University, who has been married for 29 years. She said: "The thing I most want in life is a wife. I'm not kidding. I work all day, sometimes seven days a week, and still have to go home and make dinner and have all those things to do around the house."

It is not just the extra shift at home that is a common complaint. Working women, whether married or single, also see their lack of devoted spousal support as an impediment to getting ahead in their careers, especially when they are competing against men who have wives behind them, whether those wives are working or staying at home. And research supports their argument: it appears that marriage, at least marriage with children, bolsters a man's career but hinders a woman's.

One specialist in women's studies dismissed wife envy as something women "are usually joking about" and another called it "a need for a second set of hands, regardless of gender." But therapists who work with couples on equality issues say it is no joke.

This is not a talk about the need for husbands to pitch in or for the benefits of hiring domestic servants, but of the common perception of what a helper should be and do. In an article that espouses spousal parity, their perspective betrays the expectation that for life at home to go well there needs to be a personal assistant, an aide, a wife...a helper.

The underlying text here is that while we are competent in much, none of us are so capable that we would not find someone to do some of the work we'd rather not do. We all could use someone who would fill in the gaps. What is it about your life you wish you could pass on to another?

It may be the mundane tasks of cooking and cleaning. I know having young men at home allows me to pass off the drudgery of yard work, for the most part. There are certainly aspects of our employment that, if we were honest, we'd love to pass on to another. Having a personal assistant to make dreaded calls, administrate tasks for which you have little patience, speak to annoying customers. As students would you want someone to take tests or write assignments thus freeing you up to sleep in or spend time with your friends?

We all would love a helper. What about as Christians? Earlier I read from John 14 about the Holy Spirit whom Jesus calls our Helper. Is it fair to read into that term all my desires for a personal assistant? Is it fair to assume that God is committed to aiding me to attain a better life; achieving the potential I think I am worthy of? Should I assume that it is God's goal to empower me to thrive or, at least, be at ease?

Our passage this morning helps to strip away those fuzzy notions of God as our Helper. Rather than our personal assistant, God is the Helper of the Helpless, not the aide to the otherwise self-sufficient. He is not the guarantor of happiness, but the only One who always helps.

Up to this point in 1 Samuel, God's people have repeatedly abused the notion of God's grace as they have played the games with His grace. When times were tough they fetched their God in the box to guarantee success. When success was absent and disaster pervasive, they concluded that God checked out, His glory departed. But as we saw last week God's glory was revealed to the Philistines as well as to those in Israel. But God's glory was far from a formula for success, but a powerful reminder that to play with God is to play with fire. Israel is finally at the end of their rope. With nowhere else to turn, they turn to God, but this time, broken of their own abilities and receptive to His powerful grace. READ 1 Samuel 7.

Death and destruction seem to follow the Ark of the Covenant wherever it went. Finally it rests in the house of Abinadab under the watchful care of Eleazar.

After an absence of several chapters, over the space of 20 years, Samuel speaks. As Israel suffered at the hands of their own stupidity, they lamented after the Lord, mourning their sorry state, weeping for the apparent departed glory of God from their midst. What happens next shows a change from seeing God as a helper who is nothing more than a personal assistant, someone who'll fill in the gaps, to a God who is their only hope. What happens pictures repentance that knows that they have nothing to offer of themselves while God has all that they need.

After 20 years of mourning, a lengthy time to test the validity of their sorrow, Samuel puts them to the test. If your sorrow is sincere, put away your foreign gods. Their contrition is not repentance; it does not mark a real change until they are asked to respond with their lives. Action is key. Just an "I'm sorry" is not enough.

Repentance includes two components. A turning away and a turning toward. They are to turn away from the foreign gods. What kind of gods are these? In v4 they are the Baals and the Ashtaroth. At first glance these strange deities bare no resemblance to our lives, until we realize these gender specific deities are where liturgy meets orgy, where the chapel and brothel are one and the same.

Our suburban sensibilities reject the public practice of these deities. In a culture in which rain was ensured by these gods of fertility and field through the instructive acts done by congregants on earth to encourage the gods to do the same, thus blessing the crops. To put it delicately, few people would sleep through this worship service.

How could a good child of God engage in such a horrendous practice? Simply by doing what we do best. They compartmentalized their faith, shuttered off their devotion to God and their worship of themselves so that they saw the offering of their glands as an act of piety. Personal pleasure would not be denied.

How common for us, whether living in 1100 BC or AD 2008. The vulgarity may be kept to a digital format or, if warm flesh is desired, it is certainly discreet. However, we still love our pleasures, our comforts, our ease and will worship at the altar of my own desires if I think it appropriate. God will not be a helper to this kind of worship. That must be put away. God's support of my happiness is not how it works.

The flip side of repentance from is turning to. In v3 they are to direct their heart to the Lord and serve him only.

There is an exclusivity that exceeds just making God a priority. There is a singularity that describes repentance as confessing no other help or hope except in God. The idea behind the first commandment is not just the superiority of God over other gods, but that there may be no other gods at all. It is not serve the gods of your own pleasure to your heart's delight and make some time for God the Father. There is an intolerance, an exclusivity that breaks down all other claims on our lives. Repentance confesses one's helplessness; otherwise you are saying, "I'm sorry, but..." It is just making an excuse.

The notion of the Israelites is still a mistaken part of our life. It is the idea that God must have supreme claim on my life, but other, secondary claims are tolerable. It is the idea that God will help when and where I desire, yet the rest of my life is my own.

Their commitment to serving God will take another step, one in which they will feel and see their utter dependence upon God in a way that will remind them that He exists not just to be their aide, their helper, but to be that foundation upon which they must stand.

Not just individual repentance will do. Next the whole of God's people gather at Mizpah, the traditional location for tribal convocations since the time of Joshua (20:1; 21:1). There Samuel the priest takes on the role of intercessor and the people will with one voice proclaim their helplessness to their Helper God.

At their gathering at Mizpah (6), they drew water, poured it out before the Lord, fasted and confessed their sin. This act clarifies what they thought of themselves and sets the scene for how they will respond when troubles come.

The drawing and pouring of water as well as the fasting are not commanded by the Law of Moses as specific acts His people are to do. Fasting is more familiar as it is described in the Bible. We can make a good guess about the water, though.

2 Samuel 14:14 use this image for death when it says that we must all die; we are like water spilled on the ground that cannot be gathered up again. In Psalm 22:14, prophesying Jesus' death on the cross we are told: "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint" So there is a sense of the act picturing death.

In Lamentations 2:19, Jeremiah writes "Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord. Lift your hands to him for the lives of your children, who faint for hunger at the head of every street." Here the act pictures a slightly different idea, it is the transparent revealing of one's heart to God, seeking his aide, knowing you have nothing to offer and everything to gain.

Fasting is similar and more common. It is to do without; to sense and feel one's need physically. It is a reminder that without God's sustaining power we will die. At this great meeting, they do not just name their sin; they go through the steps to feel their sin. As a people they know they have nowhere to turn.

It is here we begin to get to the core of repentance.

It is not walking through these acts. It is not just saying words, either. But what is pictured here is the complete emptying of anything we have to offer. There is no negotiating with God, but an unconditional surrender. It is not asking God to make up what we lack, it owns up to the painful truth that we lack everything. There is nothing with which I can barter, to make God help me. We must do more than admit failures, we must see that we are ruined.

This happens when we stop seeing our failures as isolated acts of disobedience and begin to see our sin as an organic network of compulsive beliefs, behaviors and thoughts that flow out of our basic alienation from God. God's help begins when our helplessness is confessed. Our lives will never change until we admit our inability to make ourselves worthy of God's grace.

It is not repentance to say I am sorry for my outburst of anger. Repentance is the pouring out, like water in the dust, all my schemes to try to control my anger. My anger is not just the harsh words I spoke, but is the organic network of compulsive beliefs, behaviors and thoughts that merely illustrate my broken relationship with my God. My anger is about me trying to control my world and expecting God to bless my sin by helping me with my desires.

Just because you master your tongue does not mean you managed your sin. Your sin will bubble from beneath and pop up in places and ways you least expect.

When we have a moment like this, when we finally come to the end of ourselves, confessing the depth of our sin, know the ache and hunger of our failure...what does God's mercy look like? What soothing sounds should we expect to hear? Look at v7...they hear the battle drums.

I'll be honest. I hate it when God does this. Do you have a picture of the unfortunate circumstance here? This is the last thing you'd want to happen. Israel, after decades of self-indulgence and expecting God to be their personal assistant, finally get the point. There is a deep, real repentance. They've poured out water to picture their emptiness without God. Perhaps quite literally as well, for they also are fasting, stomachs growling, bodies are weak. They arrived not for battle, but families broken by sin weep.

Meanwhile, the PIA (Philistine Intelligence Agency) knows this is the time to attack. The people are afraid, for good reason. Hungry and thirsty, spiritually broken they are not in a position for battle.

Gone is the presumption from chapter 4 when they sent for the ark, expecting God to help them. Gone is the certainty that God will protect them despite how they behave. What we see here is a changed national heart. They turn to Samuel, asking that he cry out to the Lord that he *may* save us from the hand of the Philistines (8). No certainty, but they place themselves at the will of what God will do.

Too often we try to use God to change our circumstances, while he is using our circumstances to change us. God is not done teaching his people a lesson about themselves and Himself. He will help them, but not completely until they see their total inability to do anything in what follows.

Samuel sacrifices a young lamb (9), which we will get back to in a moment. He cries out to the Lord and the Lord hears. Notice how in v10. While he sacrificed this lamb as the Philistines advanced to attack, the Lord thundered...Baal was the god of thunder...and the Philistines were thrown into confusion.

Yesterday after a wonderful wedding service in Lake Mills the line of thunder storms past through the area. A number of us hopped in our cars and scattered to seek protection. As I looked at the grey-green sky, heard the sirens sound the alarm for tornadoes, and not knowing where to go for safety, I experienced one of those moments when you realize that you are not as strong, smart or competent as you might otherwise imagine. The thunder that threw the Philistines into confusion is the same thunder that empowered Israel with confidence. The Philistines were certain of their power, but when given a glimpse of their inability they cowered. Israel had just abandoned the notion of personal ability and were trusting God, so when His thunder roared, knew He would act.

As the Philistines were routed by Israel, it was time for a reminder. We so quickly forget.

Samuel takes a stone and sets it up between Mizpah and Shen (a crag of rocks) and gives it a title. Ebenezer: stone of help. What Israel needed to know is what we too must be reminded constantly, that our God is a certain help, that our assistant-giving God is strong. Samuel's pronouncement clarifies it: "till now the Lord has helped us."

The marker is not geographic, just identifying the spatial extent of God's help, a boundary marker saying this is where God was helpful, from Mizpah to Shen. Rather, it gave perspective on God's temporal help – *all along, to this very point* God has helped us. It is not just in the recent rescue that God helped, but all along God's help is there.

Do you know when God was a Helper to them? It was before the thunder roared on the battlefield. It was when those 4000 soldiers died in 4:1. What was the name of that place? Remember? Yea, Ebenezer. God was the rock that helped them then when the ark was captured and 30,000 died. He helped them see that in the face of such a great national tragedy that he was not in exile, his glory was not gone. What was gone were their repentant hearts that boasted only of their ability that would only see God as a Helper that does what we want Him to do.

When has God been your helper? When everything worked out, but what about when everything went horribly wrong? Was God at work in your life when you chose to disobey Him in your life? When the consequences of your bad decisions came to roost, did God help you? God's help is all that God does in our lives to bring us to that point of seeing our helplessness. We don't see it because we are too busy looking at our own accomplishments, trusting our own abilities.

When you committed that moral failure – was God helping you? Certainly not in the sin, but now, seeing that you were not nearly as morally upright as you might have thought, as you wished others would think of you. But here is the wonderful grace of God in the face of those horrible times...he was not absent from you, but helping you step by step to see that you need a savior.

It took parched throats and growling stomachs to bring them to the point to see their inability. It was that helpless suckling lamb, whose throat was cut and body burned while the Philistines drew for battle, that pointed them to seek their help, their hope from God alone.

As the enemy advanced, poised to attack, the lamb was cut, the blood flowed.

The enemy is set to attack you today, to convince you that God will not help you because you haven't done enough, you don't deserve His help. But the lamb's throat is cut, the blood is shed and the tomb is now empty.

You and I do not need a personal assistant. We need a Savior and his name is Jesus. Today we can raise that Ebenezer, proclaiming that all through my life, God has helped me, he has helped us...what need I fear moving forward.

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<sup>1</sup> New York Times, August 27, 2007, nytimes.com