

Ebenezer

Charles Dickens, *The Christmas Carol*, tells the story of Ebenezer Scrooge an older, miserly man, who, although rich, refused to pay a living wage to his employee, Bob Cratchit. Cratchit had a son, Tiny Tim, who would die if he did not receive medical help, and Scrooge refused to increase Cratchit's salary sufficiently so that he could save his son's life. We know the story: on Christmas Eve Scrooge was visited by three ghosts (Christmas past, present, and future), and he was so frightened and so convicted that he changed his ways and blessed not only Bob Cratchit and his family but others in the community as well.

We do not know why Dickens chose the name, Ebenezer, for this old miser, but perhaps it was because he was reminded of the biblical meaning of the name (Hebrew for "stone of help") and wanted to illustrate how Ebenezer Scrooge received help to change his ways. *The Christmas Carol* is a heart-warming story, and its purpose is to guide us to think about the spirit of Christmas, namely that we help others. Scrooge's life change is invoked by his confrontation with the hurt he has caused others and how being a miser will result in his life ending in loneliness and a neglected grave. Scrooge's heart is changed, and he starts to use his vast fortune to bless others.

In the Bible, the name Ebenezer not given to a man but to a place. Like *The Christmas Carol*, the story in the Bible is about being changed from living a futile life to experiencing a life of blessing. However, that is where the similarity ends.

In 1 Samuel 7:3-17, we read about an ongoing problem that was facing the Israelites, the problem of the Philistines. Philistia was a substantial nation to the southwest of Israel, lying along the Mediterranean Sea. To the south of Philistia was a wilderness and beyond that the powerful Egyptian nation, leaving the region to the north and east as the only region which would provide the Philistines the opportunity to grow in power and size. It was the goal of the Philistines to conquer the Israelites and take their land as their own. In the time when Samuel provided leadership for God's people, the Philistines had become a threat to the very existence of Israel. In fact, in 1 Samuel 6, the Philistines had done great harm to the Israelites and had managed to capture the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol to the Israelites of God's presence among them. The ark was returned within a few months, but the Philistine threat remained.

In 1 Samuel 7 we find Samuel commanding the Israelites to rid themselves of the idols dedicated to false gods, the Baals and Ashoreths, which they had been worshipping instead of honouring the Lord, the God who had claimed them as their own. Repentant of their waywardness, the Israelites destroyed these idols and offered sacrifices to the Lord, committing their way to him alone. They had assembled at Mizpah for a service of lament and repentance.

The Philistines, hearing that the majority of the Israelites were gathered into one place, decided to take advantage of the situation and planned an attack at Mizpah that would virtually wipe out the Israelites. Samuel urged the people to pray to the Lord their God, asking him to rescue them from almost sure destruction.

God answered their prayers and when the Philistines were about to attack, sent a powerful storm that sent the Philistines into disarray. These enemies of Israel understood that the thunder that sounded from the heavens meant that the Israelite God was very powerful, and they would not be able to stand before him. Panicking, they fled, and the Israelite soldiers rushed out and attacked and defeated the Philistine armies completely. When the battle was over, Samuel took a large stone and set it up as a reminder for that generation and their children that God had won the battle on their behalf. He named the stone, "Ebenezer," (= Stone of Help) saying that thus far has God helped us.

For the rest of Samuel's lifetime the Philistines did not present a threat to the Israelites, and they lived in relative peace and safety. During the time of Saul, the first king of Israel, the Philistines again became a threat, but under David's rule they were subdued completely and did not attack Israel again.

While both The Christmas Carol and the story of the Stone of Help in the Bible show us remarkable transformation, the transformations are very different from each other. Ebenezer, being shown the error of his lifestyle and the bleak future he could expect as a miser, became generous and kind to others. This is often considered to be the message of Christmas, namely that we be good to others by giving to them. But the story in 1 Samuel 7 speaks of a different kind of transformation. The Israelites, at the beginning of the chapter, had been worshipping other gods and found themselves to be powerless against their enemies. When they repented, they began to experience the powerful work of the Lord in their lives, and they learned how God would fight their battles for them and save them from their enemies. The stone, Ebenezer, reminded them that it was God who transforms our difficult situations into times of peace. In fact, it is God who provides salvation, and the Israelites experienced that salvation following God's powerful act.

The message of The Christmas Carol has, for many, become the message of Christmas. Over and over again we are reminded that we should be having a giving spirit and bless others with what we have. We are reminded that miserliness and selfishness have no place in our lives, and we ought, instead, to be generous. This is a good message, of course, but it is not the message that, first and foremost, we should associate with Christmas.

Rather, the coming of Jesus into the world is about God's transformative power in taking oppressed and threatened people and giving them the experience of peace not only now but for eternity. Christmas is a call for us to remember that God has helped us to this point, and he will continue to help us into the future. It is a call to repentance for those times that we have put our trust in anything or anyone else than the Lord. It is a time when we are reminded that our God is dependable, and we can trust in him. True, Christmas may be a time when we are motivated to be generous to others, but Christmas, primarily, is a time for us to renew our commitment to the Lord because of his great act of salvation in Jesus Christ. We are reminded that thus far God has helped us, and we are assured that he will continue to help us far into the future, into eternity.

Pastor Gary