

Christmas at the Movies

Week 2 – “A Christmas Carol”

It's a little-known fact, and my wife will attest that I'm full of them, but Charles Dickens inspiration for the name of his main character in “A Christmas Carol” came from a tombstone that read, Ebenezer Scroogie - “Meal Man”. Back in the day, I guess it would have been common knowledge that Mr. Scroogie was a grain merchant. However, the story goes that Dickens misread the tombstone, and Mr. Scroogie went from a “meal man” to a “mean man”. So, is it any wonder that Ebenezer, that “mean man” was a Scrooge.

The word ebenezer is mentioned three times in the bible, all are in 1 Samuel. The first and second references are to a location. The third reference in 1 Samuel 7 is to that same location but it gives a little more detail. In verses 12 and 13 it says, “*Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called it Ebenezer, for he said, “Till now the Lord has helped us.”*” I think a little context may be needed. Obviously, we are in the Book of Samuel, so this is the time of the Judges. If you're not familiar with that time, God has granted Israel's wish and given them a Judge, or as it turns out, or several Judges, to rule them. During this time, Israel goes back and forth between turning its back on God and then coming back to God and asking for His favor. In the verses provided above, Israel is in one of those periods where they have returned to God. In verse 5 Samuel tells all of Israel to gather at Mizpah and “*I will pray to the Lord for you*”. And in verse 7 Samuel says, “*he [Samuel] judged the people of Israel.*” So, what we have here is a big “come to Jesus (so to speak)” meeting where the whole nation of Israel is in attendance. But to the Philistines, what we have is an opportunity.

When the Philistines heard that Israel was gathered in one place, 1 Samuel 7 tells us that “*the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel*”, and “*they [Israel] were afraid*”. If you're like me and wondering what happened to the mighty Israeli army, it helps to remember a couple of things. First, at this point, Israel had been under the oppression of the Philistines for years, so they're a little “beat down”. Additionally, Israel was gathered for a “Revival”, they were not prepared for battle. So, they did what they came to Mizpah to do, but now with a renewed passion and desire. They cried out to Samuel to keep crying out to God that they might be saved from the Philistines. And God heard the prayers of Israel and, by unusual means, routed the Philistines (read 1 Samuel 8-17).

So finally, let's get back to the ebenezer. In Hebrew, ebenezer comes from two root word, “*eben*” that means stone, and “*ezer*” that means support or help. So literally, the

word ebenezer means the “stone of help” or maybe more accurately, “the stone of the help”. So, when Samuel set that stone in place he did so as a reminder. It was a reminder to all of Israel, and really anyone who passed by, that “*Till now the Lord has helped us*”. But more than that, it was a reminder of what God had done and what God was doing. But it had to make them contemplate what God might do.

Does that sound even vaguely familiar? In “A Christmas Carol”, Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by the spirit of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future. During these visits, Mr. Scrooge is forced to look at his life through different lenses. He is forced to deal with pain and misgivings caused by his past and present, but he is allowed to see what his future can be. That is, maybe a time of happiness, a time of joy, and a time of peace.

Ultimately, it all comes down to peace, doesn't it? 1 Samuel 7:13 tells us, “*So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel*”. And in verse 14 it says, “*There was peace also between Israel and the Amorites*”. Probably the greatest result of a Christian life is peace. That peace that “*surpasses all understanding*” (*Philippians 4:7*). It's a peace we can't understand because we had little to do with it. If you finished reading chapter 7, then you know that the Israelites eventually chased the Philistines from Mitzpah and out of Israel. But at that point, God had so thoroughly confused the enemy that it was basically a mop-up operation. Peace comes with a price. But God has proven it is a price He is willing to pay, if we will allow.

But it's not as though we don't have a part at all. Samuel tells us in verse 3, “*If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only*”. And it's not a small part. We must be willing to return to God and claim His favor. To draw that line in the sand, to set the ebenezer stone along our path, so we will remember. So, we will remember that place of our transformation. A place where God stepped in and took us from a life of bitterness and misery to one of joy, from a life of oppression and bondage to one freedom, from a life of turmoil and unrest to one of peace. So, as it was for the nation of Israel, as it was for Mr. Scrooge, and as it can be for you, may this Christmas, if it hasn't been already, be your ebenezer, be your time of transformation, be your time of Peace.

I know I should stop there, but one more thing. And I think it's important because it addresses the how? We don't know how many years the peace lasted for Israel, but verse 13 tell us, “*And the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel*.” In years, that could have meant 40, maybe 50 years. But what it really meant was there was peace for as long as Samuel was alive, and praying. So, do you want transformation in your life? Do you want peace? Then pray. And make certain others are praying as well. May it be so.

