

## A Stone Named Ebenezer

Have you ever visited a monument with your family? A monument is something that lasts a long time, and is meant to help us remember the past. Sometimes monuments are statues, or carved stones, or even buildings. In Washington, D.C., you can see many different kinds of monuments that remind us of people and events from America's history, like the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and many more. People in Bible times built monuments, too. Here's a story from the Bible about two men and the monuments they left behind.

There was a time when all of Israel longed for God. They wanted to hear from Him, to be His servants and to have His protection. They went to Samuel, who was God's prophet, and asked him what they should do. "Put away your foreign gods," Samuel said, "and serve God only." And so the people obeyed. They threw away all their idols and worshipped only the one true God.



Samuel was pleased with their obedience, and told all the people to gather in the city of Mizpah. The people fasted (that means they didn't eat anything) and prayed, and told God how sorry they were for serving other gods (who weren't really gods at all, of course, but only statues made of wood or stone or metal that could not help anyone). Samuel prayed for the people, too.

In the meantime, the Philistines, enemies of Israel, noticed that all Israel was gathering at Mizpah. They were worried that the Israelites were assembling an army for battle, so they decided to prepare for war. When Israel heard that the Philistine army was on the march, they were frightened. But instead of running away or making a battle plan, they did something more important. They trusted God. Israel asked Samuel to continue to pray for them, and he did.

As the Philistine army approached, the Bible says that God "thundered a great thunder" and that the Philistine army panicked and became confused. The Israelite army easily chased them away.

Samuel picked a spot between the cities of Mizpah and Shen, and set up a large stone for a monument. He called it "Ebenezer" which means "the stone of help" so that everyone would look at it and remember, "This far we've come with God's help".

Many years later, someone else put up a monument after Israel won a battle. God told Samuel to tell King Saul to go to war against the city of Amalek. God gave very clear instructions. Saul was to kill everything—all the people, and all the animals in the city. Nothing was to be left alive.

Saul and his army went to battle, and God helped them to win, but they didn't quite obey God's commands. They killed *most* of the people, but left the king alive. And they killed *most* of the animals, but kept the best ones alive. The Bible says that King Saul was very pleased after the battle, so much so that he set up a monument. But King Saul forgot that *God* helped Israel win the battle. He built a "King Saul" monument so that everyone who passed it would remember that *King Saul* won the victory at Amalek.

After the battle, God sent Samuel to look for King Saul. When Samuel arrived, King Saul said, "I have obeyed the voice of the Lord." But Samuel knew better. "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?" he said. King Saul explained that the people wanted to give the animals to God as a sacrifice. Do you think that made their disobedience O.K. with God?

Samuel spoke God's words to Saul, "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. . . . Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king." Because of Saul's pride and disobedience, God took the kingdom away from his family, and gave it to someone else.

Did you see that some of the very same people who obeyed God in the first story disobeyed Him in the second story? That's how it is with us, too, isn't it? Every time we hear God's word, we have a choice. We can obey or we can disobey. Obedience is always best. It honors God even more than building Him a monument and it shows everyone that you really believe that His ways are right.

But when we do disobey, it can remind us how much we need Jesus. When we see that we have sinned and not only feel sorry about it, but hate our sin and never want to do it again, that is called "repentance." And when we repent and trust Jesus to forgive our sins, He promises that He will. So what about you? Are you trusting Jesus to forgive *your* sins?