

Raising Ebenezer: Mark the Place where God helped you.

Text: 1 Samuel 7:12

Summary

Ebenezer, 'stone of help', mark the places where God have helped you. These are milestones in our spiritual life. It points to where we have been so that we can have confidence in where we shall be going.

Introduction

Robert Robinson had a rough beginning. His father died when he was young and his mother, unable to control him sent him to London to learn to be a barber, Instead he learned to drink and become a gangster. One night when he was about 17, he and his friends visited a fortune teller while drunk. They made fun of the fortune teller as she tried to tell their fortune. Something about the encounter disturbed Robert so he attended later that evening an evangelistic meeting by George Whitefield. Whitefield preached from Matthew 3:7. His words haunted Robert until he gave his heart to Jesus on December 10, 1755, nearly three years later. Here is a man who have turned from a sinful life and entered the ministry at 23 years old. He wrote the hymn, 'Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing' in 1758 to remember the time when the Holy Spirit entered into his life and made all things new.

Come, Thou fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace.
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
Mount of God's unchanging love.

Here I raise my Ebenezer,

[Here I raise to Thee an altar]
Hilter by Thy help I come.
And I hope by Thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wand'ring from the fold of God.
He to rescue me from danger,
Interposed His precious blood.

Oh, to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let thy grace, Lord, like a fetter,
Bind my wand'ring heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love.
Here's my heart, take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.

In an attempt to modernize the hymn, the phrase, 'Here I raise my Ebenezer' was replaced by 'Here I raise to Thee an altar'. If you don't believe me look at your hymn books. The reason being, nobody knows what Ebenezer is. Last year a couple in this church asked me what Ebenezer is. I told them that it is the short form for Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. The idea is to compare Robert's previous life to the arrogant, self centered king. I was wrong and I apologize for giving wrong information. Ebenezer means stone of help. It is found in 1 Samuel 7:12, today's text.

ISA 7:12 Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far has the LORD helped us."

The stone is a symbol of remembrance for a time when God had helped them. Stones or pillars are often used in ancient times to commemorate important events. Jacob set up some stones to remember Yahweh theophany in Bethel (Gen.28:18, 22).

Summary of Context of 1 Samuel 7:12

To understand why Samuel set up the stone, we have to look at what happened before. In 1 Samuel 4, the first battle between the Philistine and the Israelite resulted in 4,000 casualties. The elders sent to Shiloh for the Ark of the Covenant because they thought the ark will help them win battles (4:1-4). However, driven by fear of the ark, the Philistines fought more fiercely and killed about 30,000 infantry and captured the ark. (4:5-11). The victorious Philistines first brought the captured ark to display in their temple to Dagon only to have their god fall over twice (5:1-5). In Canaan mythology, Dagon is Baal's father. Yahweh also caused the people to break out in tumors and the cities infested with rats. The Philistines then decide to send the ark to Gad and Ekron. Again the Lord afflicted the people with tumors. After seven months, the Philistines cannot stand it anymore. The Philistines then put the ark on a cart drawn by two cows and set them loose. The cows pulled the cart to Israelite territory, proving that it is Yahweh judgment on the Philistines. The ark was finally placed in Kirath-jearim. Throughout this time, the Philistines continued to harass the weaker Israelites.

Israel mourned while the ark was in Kirath-jearim, and Samuel admonished the people to do away with foreign gods. The people should served Yahweh alone (7:2-4). Samuel assembled the people for a water rite and fast at Mizpah where they confessed their sins (7:5-6). Frightened by a Philistine attack, the people persuaded Samuel to pray for them. Yahweh answered Samuel's prayer by throwing the Philistines into confusion by loud thunder and the Israeli were able to route them. After the people have completed the Philistines' defeat, Samuel set up a stone called Ebenezer to commemorate Yahweh's help (7:13-14). Throughout Samuel's life, the Israelite was able to overcome the Philistines and make peace with the Amorites (7:13-14). Samuel was judge over Israel and his yearly circuit took him to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah. His home base was Ramah (7:15-17).

There are three lessons we can learn from this episode.

1. God will help you when you are faithful to Him

The Israelites has the following problems

- They have turned away from God and worship Baal and Ashtoreth.
- They have bad leaders- priest like Eli's sons, Hopni and Phinehas.
- They depend on their own strength and their own reasoning- fight the Philistines with their army and using the ark like a magic talisman.

Things changes when they heel the advice of Samuel (1 Samuel 7:3-6)

3 And Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." 4 So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only.

ISA 7:5 Then Samuel said, "Assemble all Israel at Mizpah and I will intercede with the LORD for you." 6 When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, "We have sinned against the LORD." And Samuel was leader of Israel at Mizpah.

- The Lord fought the Philistine on their behalf.
- God uses natural phenomenon: thunder
- The Israelites only have to do the mopping up.

2. Recognize God's help when it appears(1 Samuel 7:11)

While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle. But that day the LORD thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites. 11 The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth Car

Often we look for miraculous help from God. We expect God to do great signs and wonders and are often disappointed when He did not oblige us. God often works in way that we do not understand. And we must be aware that God often work quietly

and uses the natural order of things, the weather, other people, circumstances and society. God is unpredictable. Sometimes he helps by giving us things. Sometimes He helps by taking away things.

I remember reading somewhere about someone listening and visiting Dr, Martin Luther King, “Many years ago, I went to hear Doctor Martin Luther King, Sr (preach). King said his mother had told him to always thank God for what was left. And that was something to think about: if you've got enough breath left to complain, you have something left. I thought that was very impressive, and I really made a mental note of it. Some years later I went back to Atlanta to Ebenezer Church, and by this time Dr. King had lost A. D. and M. L., his two sons, and his beloved wife had been shot to death right before his eyes at the organ in that very sanctuary. Guess what the old man was saying? ‘Thank God for what's left.’ There's always enough left in life to make it worth living.”

God helps us in many different ways. Sometimes He helps us in ways that we do not expect. But the fact we must remember is that God never fails to help anyone who calls to Him.

3. Mark the place where God has helped you (1 Samuel 7:12)

ISA 7:12 Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far has the LORD helped us."

We must always make it a point to remember how God has helped us. In the Old Testament, they use stone pillars as symbols of remembrance. They gave name to these stones – Ebenezer- ‘stone of help’, because ‘thus far has the Lord helped us’. This will be recorded and taught to their children. In their version of the Sunday school (maybe Sabbath school), they will teach the children about the events that happen at Ebenezer. And any Israelite that walk pass the stones will take a moment to remember Ebenezer.

So how as Christians are we to mark the places where God helped us?

a. Celebrations

Celebrations are an important way to remember God's help. Easter and Christmas are important dates on the church calendar because it reminds us about the help God gave to us through His Son, Jesus Christ. Christmas is when God became man. Easter is when God died on the cross for the sins of man.

We celebrate birthdays and anniversaries. We also need to celebrate important events of God's blessings and help. When I was a medical student in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), I started a Christian fellowship in the varsity. At that time, there were very few non-bumiputras and there was no Christian groups. On 24 March 2006, the fellowship which currently has more than 200 members will be celebrating their 30th year anniversary. They have invited me to attend the dinner function as their fellowship's founder. In such celebrations, we remember God's help and goodness to all the students that was part of the fellowship. Our mission statement for the fellowship was 'to produce leaders for churches in Malaysia and beyond.' God has helped the fellowship tremendously. I know that many of the former students are now leading the churches in many parts of Malaysia and some in other countries.

b. Remembrance

We used to build monuments to commemorate certain events. If you travel around London, you will see many statues and monuments. In Rome, you can see the Arc of Constantine, a Roman Triumphal Arch right next to the Coliseum where Emperor Constantine 1 rode in triumph into Rome. I am not advocating we build a statue of our pastor. I am very impressed with our 50th anniversary books because it documents the history of the church. They are

thinking of making the manse, a 125 years old building, a heritage building. These are ways we remember God's help.

We also remember important days in our lives and maybe make it a special day of thanksgiving or prayers. For me the important days are

- Day of my giving my life to Christ
- Day I became a doctor
- Day of my wedding
- Day my first daughter was born
- Day my second daughter was born

These are important days in my life and it happened because of God's help. These are days of remembrance, days of thanksgiving and praise.

c. Journal

Our memories are very poor and often play tricks with our mind. A personal journal will be a good way to record the events of God's help in our lives. We can look back and see how God has been helping us all along. Journal writing is a good spiritual discipline we can use to deeper our spiritual life.

A new form of journaling is blogging on the Internet. It is an online journal that you can add to whenever you like. You can keep your blog entries to yourself. Or you can allow selected people to read your blog or you can open to anyone. It is up to you.

d. Scrapbook

A scrapbook where you paste your photos, train tickets or newspaper cuttings are also useful guide to memory.

e. Share your testimonies.

Testimonies are an important part of remembering the help of God especially in a community of faith. Sharing what God has done in your life has three benefits

- You share what God has done for you and encourage your listener in that what He has done for you, He will also do for others.
- You affirm God's goodness because when you proclaim it to others, it becomes more real to you.
- You give glory to God when you talk about His goodness.

Continue to give testimonies in front of others, write your testimonies in newsletter and magazine (Sinews, Asia Beacon) or share with one another in your fellowship and cell groups.

Conclusion

There is an old legend about three men and their sacks¹. Each man had two sacks, one tied in front of his neck and the other tied on his back. When the first man was asked what was in his sacks, he said, "In the sack on my back are all the good things friends and family have done. That way they're hidden from view. In the front sack are all the bad things that have happened to me. Every now and then I stop, open the front sack, take the things out, examine them, and think about them." Because he stopped so much to concentrate on all the bad stuff, he really didn't make much progress in life.

The second man was asked about his sacks. He replied, "In the front sack are all the good things I've done. I like to see them, so quite often I take them out to show them off to people. The sack in the back? I keep all my mistakes in there and carry them all the time. Sure they're heavy. They slow me down, but you know, for some reason I can't put them down."

When the third man was asked about his sacks, he answered, "The sack in front is great. There I keep all the positive thoughts I have about people, all the blessings I've experienced, all the great things other people have done for me. The weight isn't a problem. The sack is like sails of a ship. It keeps me going forward.

"The sack on my back is empty. There's nothing in it. I cut a big hole in its bottom. In there I put all the bad things that I can think about myself or hear about others. They go in one end and out the other, so I'm not carrying around any extra weight at all."

What are you carrying in your sacks?

Are you carrying the remembrance of God's help in your life?

Are you marking the places where God has helped you?

Are you allowing negatives events in your life drag you down?

Carrying remembrance of God's help in your life can help you to grow faster in your spiritual life. These stones serve as reminder of the faithfulness of God. Our growing in depth in our spiritual life depends on our remembrance of the faithfulness of God. Why do you think Samuel named the stone Ebenezer and place it on the ground? It is for the edification of the Israelites. Ebenezer, stone of help, mark the places where God have helped them. These are milestones in our spiritual life. It points to where we have being so that we can have confidence in where we shall be going.

Soli Deo Gloria

¹ H. Norman Wright, *The Perfect Catch* (Bethany House, 2000), pp.28-29