

Sermons @ Ebenezer Church, Singapore

Ebenezer—Thus Far, the LORD has helped us...

Sunday, 30 July 2006 (By Ho Lye Sum)

1Sa 7:12 Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer; for he said, "Thus far the LORD has helped us."

Our meditation today is taken from 1Sa 7:12

“Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer; for he said, "Thus far, the LORD has helped us."

“Ebenezer – Thus far, the LORD has helped us”.

What made Samuel name this place Ebenezer?

Why did Samuel say “Ebenezer – thus far the LORD has helped us”?

What is the significance of this incident to us?

These are the 3 questions that we shall seek to answer today as part of our meditation.

Question 1 - What made Samuel name this place Ebenezer?

The story is quite a long one, but let me summarise it for you.

It all began with spiritual declension in Israel.

This spiritual declension was not just amongst the general people of Israel.

It was happening right in the house of the High Priest, Eli, at that time.

His sons who served in the tabernacle were supposed to lead Israel in the true worship of God.

But instead, they profaned worship.

In 1 Sam 2:17 we read that “the sin of the young men was very great before the LORD, for they despised the offering of the LORD.”

What does this mean?

It means they had the spiritual knowledge and understanding of what they needed to do.

But they deliberately went against what they needed to do.

So God punished them by sending the Philistines to attack Israel.

This seems to be a consistent way in which God deals with His children when they sin against Him.

He may send undesired situations in our lives so that we may be woken from our sin & slumber.

Someone has put it like this: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience and shouts to us in our pains”.

It is His microphone to get our attention.

So that we may realize that we have been wrong and turn back to Him.

Is God speaking to you today?

Perhaps there a major trial you are undergoing?

What is God trying to say to you in that trial?

That is the chance for you to get back to Him so that you can experience His peace.

If we know that the trial is because of some specific sin, we need to repent of it now.

Don't be like Eli's sons who found no room for repentance.

Now, we read in 1 Sam 4 that the Philistines fought a battle against the Israelites.

And this battle was fought at a place called Ebenezer (1 Sam 4:1).

Please note that this is a different Ebenezer from the place that Samuel named in 1 Sam 7:12.

There at Ebenezer, the Philistines killed four thousand Israelite soldiers – that's four battalions.

Please also note that these 4,000 Israelite soldiers who were killed were trained soldiers, not novice fighters.

So after losing this battle, the frantic Israelites started examining themselves, wondering why they lost.

We read in 1 Sam 4:3 that they held a quick conference on this matter.

And the conclusion of the elders, note – the elders of Israel, was this:

They needed to bring the ark of God into the battlefield.

For some reason, the elders of Israel felt that having the physical ark of God will help them win the battle.

Now, we all know that this would do them no good.

Because the ark was but a physical emblem.

Without the true spiritual presence of God, having the ark was useless.

But this situation tells us the sad spiritual state that even the elders of Israel were in.

Can you imagine if one of you came to our pastor and told him that you have bad dreams when you sleep.

And our pastor says to you “wear a “big cross” around your neck whenever you sleep, you’ll be alright.”

Or he says to you, hold the Bible in your hands when you sleep, you’ll be alright.

Now, we all know that it does not work that way.

But the incident shows us that the Israelites were having confidence in physical emblems and formalities.

“Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.” – Zech 4:6

The confidence of Israel should have been in the LORD.

Not in physical emblems and formalities.

And we should be reminded that our place in heaven is not guaranteed by how many times you take the Lord’s supper.

Rather, it is what the body and blood of Christ mean to you demonstrated in how you live.

That is what will count.

Not how many times you take the Lord’s supper.

Nonetheless, the Israelites brought the ark of God into the battlefield.

They started screaming and shouting with lots of emotion.

They thought they would win.

They had the ark of God with them.

They were all emotionally charged up.

But that day, they lost thirty thousand soldiers – 1 Sam 4:10.

Almost 8 times worse than what they lost earlier.

The ark of God was captured.

The priests – Eli’s sons, they all died in the battlefield.

And it all happened at this place called Ebenezer, mentioned in 1 Sam 4:1.

And Eli, on hearing the news, also died.

His daughter-in-law, upon hearing the bad news, gave birth and she died.

But just before she died, she named her child Ichibod.

Ichibod means “the glory of God has departed from Israel”.

It was a very sad day for Israel.

It was a disastrous day at this place called Ebenezer.

What a painful lesson when all your hopes are placed in physical emblems and formalities.

I guess those who survived that day will never forget that painful lesson.

And Samuel was one of the survivors.

And that lesson was always clear in his mind.

And thankfully, the story did not end there.

Samuel took over as prophet of Israel.

By the grace of God, spiritual restoration began.

Samuel remembered the disastrous day at Ebenezer.

And God was working things out for the good of Israel.

When the ark of God was with the Philistines, strange things happened to them.

In 1 Sam 5, we read that their idol Dagon was broken twice mysteriously.

No one touched the big statue, but its head and limbs were all disintegrated over night.

And their people suffered from all kinds of illnesses and diseases.

In fact, we were told in 1 Sam 6:19 that 57,000 Philistines died from such illnesses.

Israel did not have to raise a sword and the Philistines kept dying.

And there were more Philistines who died without fighting with Israel than going to war with Israel.

It was so bad that the Philistines decided that the ark of God could not remain with them anymore.

And in the meanwhile, Samuel was praying for restoration.

The children of Israel realized their mistakes and sins.

Repentance came upon them.

They said to Samuel in 1 Sam 7:8 “Cry out to the LORD for us...that He may save us from the hand of the Philistines.”

They now understood that it was not the ark that will save them.

It was not a strong army that will save them.

It has to be the LORD and the LORD alone who can save them.

And at that time, Samuel was conducting what looked like a worship service at a place between the cities of Mizpah and Shen.

This place was not anywhere near Ebenezer, where Israel lost that disastrous battle.

And there, between Mizpah and Shen, the Philistines attacked them.

They thought that Israel would be most vulnerable at this time since they were having a worship service.

That’s where they were wrong.

The LORD came to their rescue.

You see, when you are giving your attention to seeking God, your enemies cannot do anything to you.

The LORD confused the Philistines.

Now, motivated by what the LORD had done, the Israelites pursued the Philistines.

And this time, they overcame them.

This victory took place at this location between Mizpah & Shen.

And so, it is at this location between Mizpah & Shen that Samuel set up a memorial stone.

And this is where he said: “Ebenezer – thus far, the LORD has helped us”.

So, from being the name of a place where disaster struck, Ebenezer now literally means “stone of help”.

So, why did Samuel say 'Ebenezer - thus far the Lord has helped us'?

That is our second question for today.

Samuel was one of the survivors of that dreadful day where Israel lost everything at Ebenezer.

That incident at Ebenezer was a painful lesson for Israel.

They were sternly rebuked.

But now, they have learnt their lesson.

And they have repented.

And Samuel sees the beginning of the restoration of God's presence with Israel.

And he acknowledges the help of God in this battle that took place between Mizpah & Shen.

And so he says, "Ebenezer - thus far, the LORD has helped us".

Why did Samuel say this here?

It was to be a reminder of the dreadful battle that happened earlier at Ebenezer.

It was an acknowledgement of God's hand in the victory they have just experienced.

It was an acknowledgement of the forgiveness received from their repentance of their sins.

It was a reminder of the different effects brought about by repentance versus actions of human confidence.

It was a reminder to Israel that they cannot do anything without the help of God.

And this sets the tone of the direction for all their future actions.

It was an acknowledgement that they were totally dependent on God.

God has to lead them forward; otherwise, they will all fall like they did earlier.

And so, Ebenezer became a milestone in their path of spiritual restoration and progress.

And it becomes a reminder that their step forward has to be in faith, trusting in the LORD and nothing else.

Now, what is the significance of all these to us?

There are 2 things I want to say here and with that I will close.

First, the Apostle Paul says in Acts 26:22 "To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying to both small and great,"

Then in 1 Cor 15:10, he says "...by the grace of God I am what I am,"

It appears that the Apostle Paul regularly acknowledges that it is God who has brought him to the stage that he is in.

That is not just a humble expression attributing his achievements totally to God's grace.

It is also a statement of his submission to the Lord's will going forward.

Now, my dear Christian friends, you would probably have experienced your own "Ebenezers" in your lives.

And I want to suggest to you that it is a good practice to regularly take stock of your life situation.

None of us will know how much of our life is already done so far.

The Lord may choose to take us away suddenly.

And so, the regular practice of self examination and milestone checks on our spiritual lives will help us number our days.

And the lesson of Ebenezer will remind us that above all, seeking the Lord's presence should be our priority.

Do we experience His presence more today than a year ago?

Are we progressing in our spiritual life?

If not, why?

Do we realize that it is the Lord who has led and helped us thus far?

Let us examine ourselves.

To those of you who are not Christians, could God be speaking to you today?

The Israelites went their own way and God used that incident at Ebenezer to teach them a major lesson.

It was a very painful lesson but that brought them back to the path that would give them eternal life.

Have there been any similar incidents in your life that you just brushed aside without much consideration?

Eli's children were warned, but they did not take heed to God's warning.

They died a miserable death without making peace with God.

Don't let that happen to you.

Please think about your life and whether you have peace with God, the Creator of the heavens & the earth.

Talk to the leaders of our Church so that we can help you understand the only way you can find peace through Jesus Christ.

Friends, this is about eternal life.

Please think about it seriously.

Secondly, the regular worshippers in our midst are probably aware that we will be registering our Church with the name Ebenezer Church.

Why did we choose this name?

We had toggled with many names.

We needed a biblical name.

We were hoping to get a one-word name rather than a 2-words one.

We were hoping to get a name that uses the first few letters of the alphabet so that it appears early in any alphabetical listing.

We needed a name that would resonate easily with our people.

We needed a name that would easily convey the doctrines held by the Church.

As a fellowship, in case you have forgotten, we have been in existence for 11 years now.

It is not a long time; neither is it short relative to the ages of most of us.

We started in 1995 as a small worship service here in ACS Independent School.

Some of the children in our midst were born in that year.

Many of you children were born after that year.

We still have pure mandarin speaking members.

We still have bilingual members.

We now have a sizeable Filipino fellowship in our midst.

We even have a full time minister.

Indeed, the Lord has led us thus far.

But, what will the next chapter of our Church be like?

We really do not know.

It will depend on how we continue to rely on the Lord's leading rather than on our own strength.

The lesson at Ebenezer should help us regularly acknowledge the Lord's leading in our lives thus far.

It should remind us that we need to continue our journey as a Church in faith.

It should encourage us that it is the presence of the Lord that counts;

Not formalities, not Church buildings, not other emblems.

And if it is the presence of the Lord that counts, we should be directing our energies to seek this.

Our activities, our direction, our focus should be channeled towards helping all of us experience the presence of God in our lives individually and as a Church.

So, hopefully, with the name Ebenezer Church, we will always remember these things.

Ebenezer – thus far, the LORD has led us.

May the Lord continue to be with us as we seek to serve and honour Him. Amen.