

Reading: 1 Samuel 7:2-17

Theme: Ebenezer – ‘Thus far has the LORD helped us.’

In the paper the last weekend of 2019 there was a list of celebrities who had died during the previous year – as a memorial to them. Throughout our land there are cenotaph memorials to those who died in the 1st and 2nd WW as well as other conflicts over that time. The National Memorial Arboretum is the UK’s year-round centre of Remembrance. Many places have blue plaques up which record events, people and history about a house or place there.

It is good for us to remember and celebrate God’s goodness and help to our church as we come into the 40th anniversary year of the church. We do not intend to put up a blue plaque, or put up an actual stone as Samuel did here in this passage, but it is right to remember and to acknowledge God’s help: an Ebenezer. Samuel named a stone Ebenezer saying “*Thus far,*” or “*Hitherto, has the Lord helped us.*” It was a memorial, an aid to help the people remember the good hand of God on them as a nation and in their lives.

It is good for us as a church as we come to the 40th anniversary year of the church being established, to pause and to reflect on how good the Lord our God has been to us. The Lord’s hand has been upon our little church and lives - whether we recognise it or not. To recognise and own such will do us good, for it will cause us to have in view all the help the Lord has given us and we can raise our Ebenezer as a memorial stone to celebrate and commemorate this. This text, our text for 2020, calls upon us to do this, to acknowledge that “*Thus far has the Lord helped us.*” If we can personally put it in the singular “*helped me*” that is even better! We need to have a clear view of the Lord’s help this year – have 2020 vision!! Note 3 thoughts on this theme:

1. Look Back with Joy.

Events here in this passage move quite quickly, probably to cause us as readers to think of what's occurring. Yet the passage starts with *"It was a long time, twenty years in all..."* 20 years of history are summarised - in chapter 4 we read twice of Israel's defeat - Israel camped at a place later called Ebenezer (4:1), but at that time it was a place of defeat, despair and disaster. The Ark was captured, the sons of Eli killed and Eli dying as a result of shock at the news of the Ark's capture. Yes, the Ark was returned to Israel - not to the Tabernacle at Shiloh, but it ended up at Kiriath Jearim (6:21-7:1). This meant that for 20 years the proper worship of God had not been in place and the people did not seek God. Yet Samuel ministered as prophet and a judge at that time and v3 is probably his message and theme throughout those 20 years. Little by little the message struck home, the Israelites changed their ways (v4). They were then serious with God in their lives and the life of the nation. Are we serious with God in our lives, in the life of our church here?

A time came when the nation had to be challenged and called publicly to go back to God. Samuel called a big meeting for the people as a nation and called them to be serious with God (v5ff). The people were in a terrible state - serving Baals and Ashtoreths - fertility gods that centred their worship on the sex act, which was very appealing, felt so good, but it involved the worship of false gods and this caused the people and the land to suffer. Will we get rid of sin and indifference in our lives, in the church's life? God could be waiting for us to do such, so He can bless us!

It is good for us to pause a moment at the start of a New Year, to look back and think how God has dealt with us as individuals in bringing us to know Him. We may have had many privileges or many hard times in our lives; may have had opportunities to hear of God or not, but there came a time when we were brought into contact with the word of God. The message of God's word began to hit home - that we as an individual needed to go to God with all our heart and

yet there may have been areas of our lives that seem to hinder this - a drink or drug problem; a sex problem; our pride; our morality or lack of it; our religiousness, our lifestyle etc. These and many other things seemed to hinder us and yet we kept on being serious about God and seeking Him.

As with Israel, it involved repentance - us turning away from the wrong and going to God and being deeply sorry for our wrong - we call it repentance. In Israel's case they poured out water and fasted. The pouring out of water indicated wasted lives - water poured out was not drunk for refreshment and wasn't being used for irrigation. Fasting showed a seriousness with God in denying themselves legitimate things in order to concentrate on God at that time. Many of us realised our lives were being wasted and told God that was so. Perhaps it bothered us so much that we denied ourselves legitimate things to concentrate on God at that time. Fasting was done in OT and NT times to show a serious intention in seeking God and His help. We are to be serious in seeking to know the reality of God in our lives. The question is "*Are we?*"

Such things helped the people of Israel as they came in confession to God, as through sacrifice and prayer they were not only restored back to God through offering their burnt offerings (*showing total dedication to God*), but they were also delivered physically from great danger. At that time the Philistine intelligence agency realised it was a good time to attack the Israelites as they were helpless, defenceless and unprepared. Yet God rescued the Israelites in a remarkable way.

To become a Christian involves a rescue in a most remarkable way - again a lamb was slain - this time it was the Lamb of God i.e. the Lord Jesus, who agonised in prayer for us, to rescue us from our sin, from the devil and his rule - which things drag us to hell with the devil, yet the anger and punishment of the holy God fell upon the

Lord Jesus in a most awesome and awful way. This happened so we can be free from all that oppresses us. When we add to this how the Lord has watched over us in our lives, as we recognise that “*through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come*” – both before and since we came to know the Lord Jesus. We will realise it is a great deliverance which continues on in our lives. As we review what God has done for us, we grasp this more and more and have every reason to praise Him for His kindnesses.

Our past life may not have been easy, it may not be easy now, but thus far the Lord has helped and kept us. We should acknowledge such with praise, thanksgiving and gratitude! Yes, we may not understand all the way He has led us; we may have questions how and why? Yet, He has helped us, kept us and here we are at the start of 2020. So, even though we can look back with joy, acknowledging our little understanding of all He has done, yet we can look back in joy and say “*Ebenezer...*”

2. Look Around Now with Comfort.

The Israelites met together – had limited freedom and peace to do so. They met to worship and thank God who had led and helped them up to that point. What about us this morning? Here we are, we too have the freedom to meet and worship God together as His people, to seek His help and blessing. The Lord has rescued us to be part of His people - He did this out of choice and we should not choose to stay away from our meeting together with God’s people. Some would be here with us, but circumstances prevent it being so - illness, caring for loved ones, away on holiday, visiting family or working.

How do we view our privilege of being part of the fellowship here? We are to recognise the privilege, the honour of belonging, for Ebenezer - the Lord has helped us to this point. Many of us became Christians at various times, from different parts of the world. God has helped us and brought us together from different parts of UK,

from different nations and we are a gathering of God's people - this is our church and we are in fellowship with one another. The Lord has done this on purpose. We are blessed to have our own building, have the word of God preached! We have hearts, on the whole, knit to one another and the church has known God's blessing. We want to keep on growing and developing, to be able to look around us and thank God for what He is doing among us. We don't pat ourselves on the back congratulating ourselves on what we have achieved and done. Not at all.

The focus as we look around is "*Thus far the Lord has helped us*". It is He who has done it and we have achieved things by His blessing, help and power alone. Every blessing comes from Him - our power, might and abilities has not achieved anything, for it is all by the help of the Lord. Yes, we are to work and pray, but the growth, the blessing to achieve anything is because He works. Any success, any advances and progress have been because of the Lord, His help and power. None of us dare take any glory to ourselves!

The reason we are going on, are being kept as Christians is because of God - 1 Peter 1:5 "*who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.*" We are to look around at our lives as believers, as a church and we are to emphasise to our hearts and minds this is so "*Thus far, hitherto **the Lord** has helped us.*"

I could ask those who have been in the church since its beginning and they could tell its history - its beginning, struggles, highpoints, low points, and they would remind us how the Lord helped and kept the church and that is the reason we arrived here at this point of time. Samuel and Israel stood and looked back, looked at the present and said "*Thus far has the Lord helped us.*" As we look back with joy and around us with comfort, we also:

3. Look Forward with Hope.

Sometimes we can anticipate what is ahead with a sense of fear and uncertainty – not knowing what future holds. I heard of an Englishman in Dublin, who was talking to a man and found out he was from Dublin and asked him “*Have you lived in Dublin all your life?*” The man replied “*I don’t know yet!*” Irrationally we can fear the Lord’s help has stopped! Past and present evidences of the Lord’s help, should encourage us to realise His help has not stopped. Siân and I have had the privilege going to holiday in Kefalonia for many years now and we think of the journey as part of the holiday, even as we are queuing to get into the departure lounge. It’s great to get to the departure lounge, but we wouldn’t want to spend our 2 weeks in there; we are pleased that we have had a good journey up to that point! Yet it is a departure point - we are anticipating going on to somewhere better.

Each Ebenezer in our lives is a departure point - we are to go on into what lies ahead from there and we can do so with the certainty that as the Lord ***has been with us and helped us***, that He is ***with us and helping us*** now, and ***He will be with us*** and will help us in all that lays ahead. As a hymn says “*we’ll praise Him for all that is past, and trust Him for all that’s to come.*” Another hymn says “*His love in time past, forbids me to think, He’ll leave me at last in trouble to sink; each sweet Ebenezer, I have in review, confirms His good pleasure to help me quite through.*”

The words “*Thus far*” or “*Hitherto*” do not bring about a full stop to His help! Our God is not limited in His power or help. He does not stop at this or any point in our lives, at the Church’s 40th anniversary; for if He did, we may as well shut up the building and sell it; as individuals we may as well then give up trying to live for Him and His glory. As we go on in our lives, will we will continue to need His help in all our changing circumstances of life - for us as a church and as individuals. The journey for us all is not over yet.

We have more distance to travel, more joys, more trials, more highs, more lows, more victories and certainly more battles ahead. Have more comforts, more sufferings, more fires, more deep waters, more testing times to come, but many more deliverances too! Yes, we as a church and individuals will be in confusing circumstances and difficulties. Times of illness, old age, disease and death may be the lot for many of us in the year ahead. Yet as we go on, we can raise our Ebenezers as memorial stones to remember, review and note God's help. These Ebenezer stones are to be such great comforts to us as we look back on, having them in view as we go onward in our lives.

Throughout the past year or so, many of us have known dark, confusing and hurting times. In them we have been able to trust God and commit ourselves to His care, keeping, guidance and help. We knew the reality of the Lord's help, as we leant on Him and His strength and could raise another Ebenezer in and at the end of those confusing, painful and strange providence experiences.

I do not know what lies ahead for any of us as individuals, families or as a church, but what I do know is that our Lord will be there to help us in and through each situation and so we can go boldly on into the future - because our Saviour leads us all the way, what else can we ask beside? We all have personal experiences of the Lord's help and should acknowledge them as our own Ebenezer's and use them as launch pads, departure lounges to go on with the Lord.

We are to go on growing as Christians, knowing He can be trusted and relied upon as we go on with our Saviour. If you are not a Christian, you may or may not be interested in Christian things, then I ask you to consider this One will never leave you or forsake you, but will help you, but first of all He will rescue you from going to hell, give you a new home in heaven as you have His eternal life,

then He will help you to live as a Christian and to become more like the Lord Jesus.

While neither I or any of the church officers knows what lays ahead for us as a church, as families or as individuals; but we do know our heavenly Father, our Saviour Jesus and the Holy Spirit will continue to help us all, to keep us going on with Him where He wants and we are to represent Him in whatever situation we are in and to do so for His glory.

For some here, it may be the year of our death and if it is, if we have chance to do so, we could review our lives and doing so I pray we would be able to say "*Ebenezer - thus far has the Lord help me*". If we don't have chance, then when we get to heaven, we will see fully and recognise how much He has helped us and we will praise Him by raising our Ebenezers of praise.

While here on earth we can keep a record of the frequent Ebenezers in our lives and in keeping them in view, we are to give our God and Saviour thanks both as a church and as individuals for all the way the Lord has led us.