

Ebenezer: Until Now the Lord Has Helped Us

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[0 : 0 0] well if you would take your bibles and open to a 1 samuel chapter 7 you'll find that helpful i think it's on page 230 in the old testament as you're turning there that hymn was written by john newton amazing grace fame a friend of william wilberforce on the week that he preached on this verse 1 samuel 7 verse 12 i was getting a bit seasick as we sang it but i thought the imagery was good so verse 12 of 1 samuel chapter 7 says then samuel took a stone and set it up between mispa and shen and called its name ebenezer for he said till now the lord has helped us ever since i began reading 1 samuel about 18 months ago in preparation for our preaching through it i've had a strong sense of the importance of this passage for us and when we came to preach in it in october at the end of last year i had a conviction that we at saint john's ought to stop and mark god's goodness to us a little like samuel does here and build our own ebenezer because of what god has done for us what god is doing amongst us and what he will do for us and make this a day where we commit ourselves to him and when we finish when i finish speaking soon what we're going to do is we're going to build our own ebenezer and i'll explain it all don't worry it'll be an act of thanksgiving and hope and commitment and that explains the pieces of paper in front of you don't take them out now we're going to write three different things on three pieces of paper you don't have to but i'm going to invite you to and the papers i would like to be anonymous don't put your names on them but do put the year on them because you're not just writing them for yourself you're writing them they might be we might take them out and print some on our parish life notes in the months to come and when we've written them we'll stand and sing the more famous ebenezer hymn together and the children who are working on their own little pieces of paper will join us at the back and then together we will raise or erect our own ebenezer and we'll come out for a sort of public act together don't worry it's very anglican i'll explain it all is that okay if you're here as a guest welcome um we don't always do this but uh there's no compulsion it this this is just uh uh however god leads us two questions why why should we build our own ebenezer and two how do we do it firstly why there are three reasons and the first one is we've got bible precedent and it makes god happy whenever god's people are aware of his special goodness to them they market they find a way to market and god has carried us particularly over the last year indeed over the last decade and we've now moved to a new church home and i think it's right for us to do this together think about the bible precedents when noah put his feet on dry ground after being rescued by god what did he do he built an altar and sacrificed an animal and the bible says to us it pleased god made god happy when jacob left the promised land he slept on the border and in that night god came to him in a dream and promised him all sorts of things that he would bless the world through him and jacob set up a pillar and he said this the lord shall be my god and i will give him a tenth of all that i receive throughout my life or when joshua and the people of israel came into the promised land they came to the jordan they couldn't cross the jordan and god opened the way in the jordan just as he had in the red sea and they walked through on dry ground and when they got to the other side god commanded them to pick up 12 stones and to build a great massive altar on the other side so that they would testify to their children and to their children's children that god had been faithful to them in fact all throughout the old testament god arranged the life of his people around annual festivals festivals where they would mark and remember their redemption and recommit themselves to god and didn't jesus himself give us the lord's supper so that when we celebrate the lord's supper we look back we remember his goodness to us and we commit ourselves and we feed on him by faith in our hearts with thanksgiving it's exactly what samuel's doing here in chapter 7 he sets up an ebenezer till now the lord has helped us it means to mark god's special goodness and presence with them and cause his people to serve them with all their hearts so there's a biblical precedent it makes god happy second reason we'd be amazingly ungrateful if we didn't i mean as a church family god has brought

us through a remarkable time hasn't he i mean the last 10 years have just been awful and wonderful and terrible and brilliant and strange we've had to make a stand for the faith once for all delivered to the saints it's been very difficult to contend as well as to rejoice and celebrate and move forward and there's been a great deal of uncertainty there's still some uncertainty for us of course and it's been hard going and there has been sorrow and some of us have faced great difficulty and pressure through it and all along as a church we've learned more about how to lay our needs before god in prayer about how to submit to a wider leadership around the world and how to consult with one another prayerfully we've given a great deal of time and energy to try to discern our way forward and god has answered our prayers perhaps not in the way you might have chosen or i might have chosen but god always answers our prayers in ways that are better for us than we could hope and imagine for example he's given us a supernatural unity i believe he is giving us and has given us a greater care for each other he enabled us when we left our property in granville to bless those who would come after us as we lost the court case and our spirit has been with us his spirit has been with us over this last year as i understand you've given more financially than ever before and now here we are as welcome guests and if i may speak very personally i have learned a lot about the lord being my helper sometimes you you may need i think i need a lot of help but sometimes uh sometimes you don't know the help you need until god um i'm not sure how to say delicately takes the two by four to you and then you learn how much you need to depend on him so this is um we do this because of biblical precedent it pleases god and secondly we'd be very ungrateful and thirdly we don't want to miss what god is doing amongst us see it is it's easy to just skip along the surface of life and to be involved in things and not really to understand their god-given significance you know it would be possible for us as a church to buy a new property and build a shiny big church and then so

and then just settle back into a mediocrity a fruitless christian existence god has done more and god is doing more than just moving our address do you think that i mean moving is about much more than just moving god is changing us and the last eight years ten years for us have not have been they've not been about location they're not they're not even about the anglican brouhaha they're about what god is doing will do in us and through us we were a mainstream anglican church a bit on the bulky side forced into a public conflict we felt the edge of public disapproval we lost our buildings became refugees and now thanks to the grace of the adventist church here we have moved from being refugees to being pilgrims and even honored guests and i want to say this to all of us before we move forward and ask the question what now we must stop and humble ourselves under the mighty hand of god and seek his face for our future yes so important we do this we're going to face a whole different set of temptations now you know we could have a brilliant shiny strategic plan with incremental implementation leave god out of it nothing's going to happen unless god goes with us and we go with god so today is an ebenezer moment for us to look at what god has done to turn to him and seek his face and to lay ourselves open to his transforming grace ask him again to be our god and the god of our future and to commit ourselves to him that's why we're doing it all right secondly how do we do it how do we build our ebenezer well this is our ebenezer here and i want to tell you this is choice number four it's not necessarily aesthetic quality that we're looking for how are we going to do this well samuel set up a stone called ebenezer till now the lord has helped us just think about that idea until now the lord has helped us it looks two directions doesn't it it looks back with joy and thanksgiving and there's this realization that god has done something we couldn't do god's very good to us but it asks a question about the future doesn't it till now the lord has helped us the question is is god going to continue with us is he going to continue helping us and i just say this before we look at the how satan hates us doing this he he doesn't want us to be thankful for the past he wants to take everything for granted he wants us to presume on god for the future he doesn't want our false idols to be exposed he much prefers christians being grumpy and complaining in fact there's a whole book in the old testament on how to complain well this is the way satan works ever since the garden of eden what he does is he he tries to put doubt about the past he says ah god didn't really god didn't really say that he didn't really do that and then he denies the future he says ah you're not going to die that's not going to come true because he wants us to focus just on the present if you're someone who focuses just on the present satan's got you right where he wants you so what we are going to do we look back and we are going to look forward we're going to look back with thanksgiving and we're going to look forward with faith this is how we're going to do it so let me talk about these two things firstly looking back

till now the lord has helped us help is a little weak it's not that god saw a little trouble and he pitched in you know in hopes for a tax receipt it's it's god doing for us what we could never do for ourselves it's god taking his glory his strength and his majesty and putting them at our disposal working for our good through it delivering this is exactly what we've just celebrated at christmas isn't it the son of god becoming a human for us living our life for us dying our death being raised to life again defeating death defeating satan defeating sin opening the kingdom of heaven to us and in this context in 1 samuel chapter 7 the context is very important because the chapter begins with the people of god in a mess again their spiritual leaders were weak they were sexually loose spiritual leaders had all the trappings of religious leaders but they had contempt for the word of god and if you're with us in the september term you will remember in chapter 4 they went out to battle against the philistines and the philistines gave them a shellacking and so they thought our magic box isn't here they brought the ark of the covenant into the battle and then they were slaughtered and the ark of the covenant was stolen was taken by the philistines and here we are 20 years later and chapter 7 takes place in exactly the same place where israel was slaughtered it's the same place and miraculously the people of god turn back to god and pray like for the first time they say we're going to put away our false gods and they confess their sins and they say samuel prophet keep preaching keep praying to us and when the philistines get wind of it they think this is going to be easier than shooting fish in a barrel the people of israel are gathered together they don't have any weapons they're praying they're sacrificing and so they surround them and cut them off and it looks like it's the end of israel and as a whole group they turn to god and ask samuel to pray and samuel takes a lamb remember the reading and he offers it as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of their sins and right as the lamb is being sacrificed in the middle of it god thunders from heaven throws the philistines into confusion and they are routed entirely and the next verse verse 12 samuel set up and ebenezer until now the lord has helped us it's a great story chapter 7 it is like the shape the shape of the whole bible itself isn't it you think about it god formed israel for himself he rescues them from egypt he puts his presence in their midst with the ark he gives them the promised land he promises i'm going to bless the world through you and what do they do as soon as they get into the promised land they forget god and they go after the other gods of the philistines ash tart bail it's exactly what we do of course and so at the beginning of this chapter god calls them to put away all their idols and to serve him alone and then he rescues them because salvation and the blessing of god does not come through our ability or through our spirituality it comes as we turn to god and we turn to god through a lamb that's been sacrificed for the forgiveness of our sins because that's what we need saving from and here's the thing that's very helpful about this passage it keeps talking about idols you can be around

church for a long time you can look the part and you can have god somewhere in your pantheon but there are other things that are just as important as he is to you here at the beginning of this chapter samuel's been preaching for 20 years and god's people have been deaf they feel sorry for themselves you see in verse 3 they lament after the lord they mope around where's the lord they do not learn from their suffering they do not seek god with all their hearts until verse 3 they've just complained about how hard it all was but here's the thing every difficulty every affliction every roadblock in your life and in my life is meant to drive us back to god it's meant to show us the futility of the idols that we worship it's to wake us up so that we give our lives to him verse 3 is the turning point let me read it if you just look down at it samuel said to the house to all the house of israel if you are returning to the lord with all your heart then put away the foreign gods and the ashteroth from among you direct your heart to the lord and serve him only and he will deliver you out of the hand of the philistines see god cares deeply about what's in our hearts he cares deeply about being our god he desires to turn his face towards us he desires for us to rely on him to call on him to trust him to ask him for things to live as though he is god but the problem is we continue to fill our hearts with idols and when we do that what god does is he takes us to the place where we are beyond our abilities and beyond any sense of control so that we will trust in him has he not done that for us do you think he's done that for us i think he has i think he's brought us to a place where we have to rely on him like all the scriptures the real issue here is the issue of the heart because what we do and how we do it demonstrates where our hearts are truly directed what consumes our hearts what's really precious to them and you know idolatry isn't just bowing down to a block of wood it's not just something that's done once a week in primitive cultures idolatry is the constant drift of our hearts later on in the old testament god says this my people have taken their idols into their hearts and then he says but i want to lay hold of the hearts of my people that's god's desire he wants to lay

hold of our hearts see idolatry is why we do bad things see when i'm nasty or selfish or jealous or rude the reason ultimately is because there's something in my heart that's more important to me than jesus christ idol worship is the uber sin every sin is a form of idolatry underneath every wrong action and thought that i have there's an idol somewhere and the idol can be a terrific thing in itself and can be my family or my friends or it can be a desire for others to think well of you it can be something neutral like a house or a career or or it can be something tacky but when it's threatened you know how you know your idols are threatened it's when you become anxious it's when you become angry when you become absorbed in

[20 : 08] yourself just shows us jesus is not the central thing something else is you think about it what is it that keeps you awake at night what is it you find yourself thinking about when you're all alone what is it that you would sacrifice friends for to the way god changes us is not by lots of rules and morality but by addressing our hearts and calling us to trust him to let go of the other idols he will have he will take grip of our hearts and ebenezer ebenezer was the day when god's people turned to him with all their hearts they put away their gods they directed their hearts to him and he saved them you see it's when we look to god that we see his hand acting on our behalf doing what we couldn't do for ourselves he shows himself faithful and forgiving don't you think it's a wonder that god doesn't cast us away that he has been with us every step of the way these last years laying hold of our hearts what he is doing is he wants us to love him with all our heart with all our soul with all our mind with all our strength this is what god has been doing amongst us last week i've been reading the saint john's reflection book and there's a wonderful letter in there by one of you about one of the crucial meetings that we had we had so many crucial meetings and there was a crucial vote and the description of it is just beautiful where we it was a secret ballot and we sang some hymns we didn't know what was going to happen we prayed and worked and we talked and talked and talked and prayed and the vote came back almost unanimous and there was this great sense of joy and relief in the unity of god we have so much to be thankful for individually and as a church and as we look back we strengthen our own faith as we raise this ebenezer and we bring to mind and we bring into our heart the things god's done so we build the ebenezer firstly by looking back and more briefly looking forward until now the lord has helped us will he continue to help us is there a guarantee that god will go with us i think this is a call for us to direct our hearts to him alone this is this is the way god works god's desire god's plan is that we will trust him and what he does is this very few people i know have had this sudden experience but ongoingly he exposes our idols he shows himself to be faithful and good and brilliant and worth more than anything else so that our hearts gradually grow in love toward him and he renews us constantly remember abraham what was the first story in the abraham narrative it was when god called abraham and said you got to leave your place you're comfortable your familiar place and you've got to set out for a land that i'm going to give you and abraham believed god and god counted it to him for righteousness and what's the last event in that the abraham life it's where god calls on abraham to offer up his son isaac as a sacrifice and as he obeys god provides a scapegoat god will have us believe in him and if god is god the loss of our buildings comes to us from his hand it's a big thing for us it's not a big thing for him but it is part of him shaping us so that we will trust him that we would be a people who love him and love one another and

value what he values discipleship that we trust him unconditionally that's why prayer is such a pivotal thing in this story it's in prayer that we show what's really important to us and here's israel faced with overwhelming opposition annihilation annihilation really they look down the barrel of death they pray god hears and acts and that's how we've got to move forward how do we grasp god's help for our future it's not going to be by strategy and numbers and finances and success it's only if god is with us what counts for us as a christian community not the resources and talent and skill as important as they are it's if god is with us it's never the strength of the difficulty or opposition that causes god's people to fail and to be defeated it's only if god is not with us and at the center of the phrase till now the lord has helped us is the lord himself god our strength our refuge the saving gun god the one who is worth serving until until now the lord has helped us this god who loves us and yearns for his people and he promises i will be with you he promises to go with us to share his glory and renew us and our role today is to bring everything in alignment with him to serve him alone to put away our false gods and to seek him with all our hearts so now the time has come would you help me build an ebenezer this morning and i wonder if you would take out your little pieces of paper and there's pencils in front of them who work and wonder him and consider on

there's nothing anything or that's true made us it's