

New Year Service - A Monument To God's Help

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Date: 02 January 2019

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[0 : 00] Well, you turn with me now, please, for a short time to 1 Samuel chapter 7 and the verse 12 especially. 1 Samuel 7 and verse 12, Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shinn, and called its name Ebenezer.

For he said, Till now the Lord has helped us. I'm sure we all have a spot somewhere in this world which we associate with a particularly special time, whether it's something that happened while we were on our own, perhaps even in prayer with God, whether it's a place where we had a marriage take place, a place associated with our families, with our children.

But there are special times in our experience that we associate with certain places where that experience took place.

Memorable experiences, memorable places because of that. Perhaps it's just even this building that's a special place for us because we associate it with a blessing that we received from the Lord.

Well, Israel were here given a place that they would regard as special because here Samuel set up this stone between Mizpah and Shinn, a monument which was a monument to God's help.

[1 : 32] Not only did he set up the stone, but he added a testimony to the name of the stone. The name of the stone meant stone of health, Ebenezer in Hebrew, that's what it means.

And along with that, Samuel added, Till now, the Lord has helped us. The testimony that the stone was a marker for a monument to, was the Lord's help to them right up to that moment.

And you have something interesting here because going back to chapter 4 and verse 1, you find Israel went out to battle against the Philistines.

They encamped at Ebenezer and the Philistines encamped at Aphek. Philistines threw up in line against Israel and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines.

Now, there's the same name, but it's a different place. It's not exactly the same spot here, though it has the same name as the stone that here is called Ebenezer.

[2 : 40] Previously, Israel experienced defeat at Ebenezer. That was their own fault. They had abandoned the Lord and as we'll see, they had imported so many other practices into their worship and God was displeased with them.

But here, Ebenezer signals a change from the previous Ebenezer. The place Ebenezer that had been associated with defeat, now becomes a word that's associated with triumph, with victory, and with God's help.

And that's interesting, isn't it, as we ourselves associate certain places with experiences that we would not want to have repeated. Experiences that in our own spiritual life might amount indeed to a defeat or a failure, where we know that we were not true to God.

And yet, we can come back to the Lord as Israel did, and erect an Ebenezer as testimony to God's help, that he did not indeed abandon us.

So here, in the previous place where they had expected victory, Israel met with defeat. They went out confidently. They hadn't realized the Lord was not with them.

[4 : 00] And so they experienced defeat. And here they come in this chapter to experience a victory, where the Philistines are thoroughly defeated, and in fact, where it's such a defeat, as means that they never again came, in Samuel's time, into the territory of Israel.

Now, that same word is a word that we can take with us, surely, into this new year as well. Come to the end of one year and into the next, in a sense, it's just a date on the calendar.

It's just a change from one year to another. But we always associate new year with reflection, and with projection, with looking back, and as far as possible, to look forward, and to look forward by the light of God's word, especially.

And Ebenezer is a word that we can take into this new year with us, both as reflecting on God's goodness in the past year, but also seeking that that will continue to be our experience as this year unfolds.

This is our testimony, too. This is how we begin a new year. This is how we want to continue with a new year, till now the Lord has helped us.

[5 : 13] And if we take that as our monument every single day of this new year, we will not go far wrong in our lives, because testimony to the Lord's help in praising Him means that we value the presence, the power, the promises of God, and that God Himself will be true to His promises if we are true to Him.

So let's look, first of all, at Ebenezer and Reformation, because that's what's going on here with Israel. Ebenezer and its relation to Reformation, and secondly, Ebenezer and Victory, because that also is very much a part of the chapter, what it describes.

This chapter really is a chapter of new beginnings for Israel. It's a chapter where they are now at a new stage in their commitment to the Lord and to their advance as a people.

It's a new dawn. Indeed, it's a reformation, because as you read there, in verse 3, Samuel said to them, If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from among you, and direct your heart to the Lord, and serve Him only, and He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.

So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and they served the Lord only. The emphasis that Samuel laid out for them was an emphasis on wholehearted commitment to the Lord, on consecration to the Lord, in a wholehearted way.

[6 : 48] You see, they had actually, all of these 20 years, they had lamented, or at least in the more recent time, they had lamented after the Lord. They'd come to realize that they actually needed the Lord, having lost sight of that great truth all of these years.

And now that they were coming to, in their own way, look towards the Lord again, Samuel took advantage of that situation, of course, and this is what he said to them.

This is fine, he says, if you're returning with all your heart, and if you're doing that, then show that you mean that by putting away these idols from amongst you.

That's then what they did. They put away the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and they served the Lord only. Our genuineness in our commitment to the Lord is shown in what we do with the alternatives that we hold on to.

Are we going to hold on to them instead of having Christ more closely followed? That's what the Israelites here teach us. They put away the Baals and the Ashtoreths.

[7 : 54] As I look into my own life, the beginning of this new year, I find, as I reflect on the year that has passed, that there are many Baals and many Ashtoreths, many things that I have served in this year that really I have done before I have committed my heart truly to the Lord.

I have not begun every single day the way I should. I have not ended every single day the way I should with the same level of commitment, with the same testimony of trust, spoken to the Lord in prayer.

And I'm sure you have the same sort of confession to make as you begin this new year. Well, here is Israel saying to us, let's make it this year a year of deeper consecration.

I'm not suggesting any of you here are not consecrated to the Lord. But I and you will have to acknowledge surely before the Lord that there's always room for improvement, always room for deepening our relationship with the Lord, always more room for the Lord by throwing out the things that we so often give place to before we give place to the Lord and to His worship.

And of course, what you want for yourself and for this congregation is something you want also for the people that you live amongst. We live amongst a generation that have very little concern to acknowledge the Lord's help because they don't want it.

[9 : 21] They don't believe in Him. They don't realize that they live and move and have their being in Him even while they're busy seeking to destroy His gospel and deny His existence.

And we pray today for the people we live amongst. We pray that they too will come to throw away the bales and the astros that fill their lives so much at this time.

The useless idols of this world that are such an offense to God, particularly those idols that have replaced God and have been elevated to the position of gods.

You don't have to go far to realize that that's the kind of situation we face. And so today, let's seek that the Lord will, in blessing, in the gospel, come.

And people will come to throw away their idols and replace them with themselves so that they consecrate themselves to the Lord. And what better stimulant is it for ourselves as a worshipping people?

[10 : 29] What better stimulant is it for us to be more consecrated to the Lord than this testimony of Samuel? Till now, the Lord has helped us.

Doesn't that itself mean that we should now build on that and further consecrate ourselves to the Lord? So there's a consecration in this relation between Ebenezer and Reformation, but of course, they're here also to worship.

Samuel gathered the people, as verse 5 tells us, gather all the people of Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord. So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the Lord and fasted on that day and said, we have sinned against the Lord.

And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah. They've come together for solemn confession. They've come together for solemn seeking of the Lord. They've come together to confess their sin against the Lord.

They've come together as a people, in other words, to direct their thoughts to the Lord and to worship Him. And this year, that's what we want to continue to do.

[11 : 40] We've mentioned a number of times over the past year how blessed it is to share together in the Gospel and in Gospel work. And in sharing together to experience that unity that we have in the Gospel, in Christ, and in the work of the Gospel.

And here is really what Samuel is setting before Israel too. That together, as they've come to worship the Lord and seek the Lord, he is going to pray for them and they're going to witness the Lord actually coming to show Himself in a great victory on their behalf.

There are many Philistines, to use the word, because Philistines in the Old Testament are the enemies of the Lord along with others. There are many Philistine types around us today as we worship.

And they're not in any way slow to show their opposition to the Gospel. Philistines are too strong for a fragmented church.

Philistines are too strong if we are disunited, if we don't maintain our unity in the Gospel and in worship.

[12 : 57] I think I referred last Lord's Day to Philippians chapter 1 where Paul was there emphasizing for them whether he was going to ever see them again or not.

He wanted one thing to be true of them, to hear of them, that they were standing fast in their work for the Gospel. This is how he put it, chapter 1 of his letter to the Philippians in verse 27.

Convinced of this, he says, I know I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in faith. Only let your manner of life be worthy of the Gospel of Christ so that whether I come and see you or else I am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the Gospel and not frightened in anything by your opponents.

This is a clear sign to them of their destruction but of your salvation and that from God. how exactly the Philippians standing firm together in the Gospel was going to be a sign, a very definite sign to their enemies of their destruction and of the salvation of the Philippian Christians.

Well, it can't say but that's what it says. If you're striving together for the faith of the Gospel not frightened in anything by your opponents, this is a clear sign to them of their destruction.

[14 : 38] See, the Lord hits the conscience of people who deny Him even by what they are seeing in the unity of God's people in their worship and in their witness.

Don't think that what we're doing here today goes unnoticed in Stornoway. As you've gathered here for church today, people are saying, why are they going to church today? What a ridiculous way to begin a year to gather together in worship.

But these people really just should know something better than what they're actually doing in their attachment to this ancient book. All of these kinds of comments that you're so familiar with, of course, they notice and of course, they know what you're doing and they know why you're here and they know why you're living as you're living your life as a Christian in the world.

That is because you love the Lord and it's because you're devoted to the Lord and of course you want His kingdom to advance. That's going to draw their opposition as it did the Philistines here as we'll see in a moment.

But as Paul said to the Philippians, it's an evident sign to you of your salvation though it is to them of destruction.

[15 : 46] And so, let's show that unity in everything we do. Everything we do in the congregation which accompanies the services of worship, we have to regard them as a united combination of exercises of opportunities of privileges in serving the Lord.

The Sunday school, the campaigners, the parent and toddler, the creche, the tweenies, all of these age groups and activities, the over 55s fellowship, the caber faith, the prayer meetings, they all belong together.

And as we combine these things together and as we partake of them and participate in them, that's essentially serving the Lord in the gospel side by side, shoulder to shoulder.

So whether we're actively involved in these groups ourselves or not, we know that we're involved prayerfully. We know that we're involved supportively, encouragingly.

And that's really so essential for those who are leaders of these groups, especially to know that they have your support, to know that you're praying for them, to know that you actually remember them before the Lord in the work that they do.

[17 : 11] That's really as Israel here gathered together to Mishpat, to dedicate themselves again to the Lord, to confess their sins. That's what we ourselves want to be doing increasingly in this year.

So again, I would say to you, don't miss any opportunity you have to be with the Lord's people in worship or in gospel activities. It's part of our privilege and our witness to the Lord in this place.

And then thirdly, along with consecration and worship, there's dependence. If you look at verse 8 there for a moment, the people of Israel said to Samuel, do not cease to cry out to the Lord, our God, for us, that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines.

Well, you may say, not much sign of faith there. Why didn't they pray for themselves? They're just saying to Samuel, don't you stop praying for us. But then you go back and you contrast that with chapter 4 and verse 3, where you find the people themselves taking the ark of the Lord and saying, let's bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.

The ark, really, for them, was a kind of talismanic box. They thought as long as the ark was there, everything was okay. But the ark without the Lord is just a box.

[18 : 38] It's not the ark itself that gives them victory, it's the Lord of the ark. It's the God that they had then abandoned and turned their back on and been unfaithful to. And when they come here in chapter 7, they realize that they need to depend on the Lord.

Yes, they're asking Samuel to pray for them, but there's a huge improvement on chapter 4. And they're realizing now that if they're going to face the Philistines and have any hope of success against them, they need the Lord's power.

They need answer to prayer. They need to continue to plead with the Lord that He will actually help them. And so that's what we need to do as well.

All of these things that we're doing are very, very important. But just as Israel's ark was, the ark of the covenant, wasn't of any use without the Lord's power, neither will any of our activities be if God isn't in them and with them.

we need to depend on Himself. I need to put that to myself so often when I prepare to come to the pulpit. I'm sure others here who are ministers and who are preachers of the gospel will readily acknowledge the same.

[19 : 56] It is so easy just to come and depend on routine or depend on having done it before or depend on experience or depend on others praying for you.

We need to depend each and every one of us on the Lord Himself. That's where our life needs to be firmly based, rooted, anchored continually.

So Ebenezer and reformation for Israel and for ourselves. Hitherto, till this time the Lord has helped us. Ebenezer, secondly, is related to victory.

Now the Philistines' reaction is not surprising because as you see there in verse 7 when the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel.

They acted immediately. They wanted to just get in there first with their attack. And that's how it is with reformation. Reformation always provokes Satan into action.

[21 : 02] Gospel blessing always provokes opposition. The world will actually not sit easily with seeing God's cause advance.

People will not actually accept your advance in holiness by just going along with everything you're doing and by just supporting everything we're seeking to do for the Lord.

Of course not. You don't expect that. That's not how the world is. That's not how Philistines act. And the Philistines, as they immediately made this attempted attack on Israel before, I'm sure they were thinking before Israel really could gather themselves further together, they would just get in first.

Make sure that the first prong of attack again just defeated Israel as before. But they chose the wrong moment. they attacked Israel when Israel were repentant, when Israel had turned to the Lord, when Samuel was praying, when a sacrifice was being offered to the Lord for the people.

It's the wrong moment. But that's how it is with the world. The attack is inevitable, but they don't always get it right. And if they meet with a united church, a church praying, a church depending on God, a church united in the gospel, a church with God's power in it and with it, it's not surprising that the Philistines were overthrown.

[22 : 37] The result was inevitable. God was back with Israel in power. They had put things right. And however right we may already have things, if we depend on the Lord and go out in His strength.

Don't be surprised if there are more conversions. You know, sometimes we kind of are surprised, aren't we, when we hear about conversions. Maybe it's because we don't have so many of them these days as we would like.

We shouldn't be surprised at people being converted. We shouldn't be surprised even if the leaders of those campaigns against the gospel out there today in Stornoway.

We shouldn't be surprised if these leaders actually are converted by the Lord. Isn't that what you're praying for? Isn't this God a God who answers prayer? Why should conversions surprise us?

If we're thoroughly committed to the gospel and to the Lord and dependent on Him, we should be surprised if there are few conversions. That's the vision, that's the attitude the Bible encourages us to have.

[23 : 44] That's what we must seek to take with us into this new year as we pray for ourselves, as we pray for the congregation, as we pray for us in our families, as we pray for those communities we belong to, as we pray for the world out there.

Don't be surprised if God shows Himself to be God because that's what He does. That's who we serve. The God who has given us the gospel and the result here was inevitable because when they went out against the, when the Philistines went against Israel and as they were offering their worship, verse 10, as Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, so it's very deliberate that description, very important that we see just how it's put.

As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel. Well, you can see from the way that that's put, they hadn't a chance because this is when they came against Israel.

When Samuel was offering up the burnt offerings, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel and if you know anything of the Lord, even without reading any further on, you would say, they haven't a chance of victory because that's what they're facing.

And so you read, but the Lord thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion and they were routed before the Lord.

[25 : 14] Now, the thunder of the Lord was not something entirely new, but they hadn't heard it for a long time. For at least 20 years, the thunder of the Lord had been absent from Israel.

The thunder of the Lord is God dealing with those that come against Him to rout them. The thunder of the Lord is the power that takes hold of people's lives and changes them and turns them into His ways.

We don't know what this year ahead holds for us, only the Lord knows that. But we know the Lord. We know what dependence upon Him is promised.

We know His promises. We know so much that He has given us to know in the Bible, in the Gospel. We don't know what events this year may hold for us.

There will be the usual amount, I'm sure, of partings, sorrows, joys, births, unexpected events, challenges, encouragements, and so on.

[26 : 39] But wouldn't it be wonderful if it were a year of the thunder of the Lord, if the thunder of the Lord were again heard throughout our communities, peace, if the thunder of the Lord were experienced by us as a congregation, and wider than that.

Thunder is heard widely when it happens. And when we find God coming and blessing and reviving power, it doesn't tend to remain just located in one place for too long.

It's heard elsewhere, and it moves on and it multiplies. That's what we're surely praying for, for ourselves, our communities, our congregations, our church, our denomination.

let it be a year for you and for me by God's grace when we will be pleased to raise up many Ebenezers, many monuments to God's help.

And let it be a time when by God's grace we experience His blessing of the gospel and thunder, the routing of His enemies.

[27 : 55] We need it in our day. We need it badly and we pray for it to God's own glory. Let me finish now with a Gaelic prayer.

Geir of Janice has she'n taingel gout. Gondolwyn can you fi gafir crout sa gafir lliw si ma'r ar gias, ma'r fersuri. Has she'n taingel gout inniw gondolwyn can you fi gafir geras sa'r blionni gafir o da baeis ar anochg gain anonimic dae.

Taingel gondolwyn can anondochus yw e gafir crout ar sanabiliu na haroan. Agus taingel gondolwyn gand kujach gafir gui gairuut gymic taeannan eich eir eir eir eir genu aneith ti.

Gynhien agus gaar caarnsnoachgain. Sgynionich ito gain gymic bianoch eich tae hosgeal gynhien wey This is the two wars period when we Shh come to Hall of Young family Amen.

Well, let's conclude our service today singing in Psalm 124. Psalm 124. That's on page 170. If God the Lord had not been on our side, let Israel say, Had not the Lord been near when foes attacked us, filling us with fear, and when the wrath against us reached its height, alive we had been swallowed in their spite.

[30 : 22] We'll sing the whole of the psalm, these three stanzas, page 170. If God the Lord had not been on our side. Amen. If God the Lord had not been on our side, let Israel say, Have not the Lord been near, when foes attacked us, they renounce with fear, And when their wrath against us reached its height, alive we had been swallowed in their spite.

We would have been and never by the flood, Over our heads the forest would have gone, The waters would have carried us along, But praise the Lord, for He has set us free, And has now led us to their cruelty.

We have His name, just as a captured bird, And of the fowl earth's net has been set free, The seer is cross, we are at liberty, Our help is in the name of God the Lord, Who did the earth and heavens by His word.

As you know, Reverend Kenny I has been off with an infection for the last couple of weeks. He is back home and is improving, but still on antibiotics orally, So we just wait for his progress and pray that he will speedily make a recovery and be back, Where he loves to be with yourselves in the congregation and preaching the gospel.

I know you continue to remember him and his family in prayer at this time. If you allow me please to get to the main door, I'll greet you on the way out. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, And the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always.

[33 : 23] Amen. Amen.