

“Here I raise my Ebenezer”

How did an obscure location in 1 Samuel
become part of one of the most famous hymns of the church?

Tonight we are concluding our story of Ebenezer and Ichabod.

The Battle of Ebenezer opened chapter 4 and a different Ebenezer closes our passage,
while Ichabod – no glory – well described the condition of Israel
when the Ark of the Covenant was taken captive.

As we have seen in these chapters, the Word of the LORD was rare,
there was no frequent vision,

At the first Ebenezer, the people of Israel brought the ark to Ebenezer
because they were seeking God’s help.

“Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by thy help I’m come!”

There is a mocking irony in those words!
Because Israel sang them in 1 Samuel 4.
Israel is not following other gods.
Israel is trusting in Yahweh to save them!
Will God be a rock of help to them?
Will he be their sure fortress?

But the LORD came in judgment against the house of Eli
and against all Israel for their sin.

*So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled,
every man to his home.*

*And there was a very great slaughter, for there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers.
And the ark of God was captured,
and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phineas, died. (4:10-11)*

God had judged him for honoring his sons over his God.

The news of Israel’s defeat was disheartening.
The news of his sons death was heartbreaking.
But Eli could live through that.
Eli already knew that God would kill both of his sons in a single day.

But the ark?

Eli knew as well as you that God does not *physically* reside in the tabernacle.

But the ark was the physical demonstration of God's presence with his people.
For God to remove the ark from the land
is for God to say "you are no longer my people."

And Eli's daughter-in-law understood that as well –
naming her son Ichabod – "no glory" – because
The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.
And she died.

1 Samuel 5 recounts the exile of the ark of God.

The problem was not that Israel had too high a view of the ark.

Israel had too low a view of the ark!

Because in chapter 5, the ark does everything that Israel could not do!

If 1 Samuel was trying to rebuke Israel

for thinking of the ark as having supernatural powers,

then chapter 5 would have been counterproductive!

The exile of the ark of God is designed to show Israel that God doesn't need *them*.

When the ark went before Israel in the days of Joshua,

the Jordan River parted, Jericho's walls fell down,

and Israel received their inheritance.

Now the ark will go before Israel against the Philistines!

Before Samuel, Saul or David, the first victory against the Philistines in Samuel's gospel
is when the ark goes alone into Ashdod.

And yes, I called it Samuel's *gospel*.

Because Samuel is all about the good news of the coming of the kingdom of God –
when God himself goes before his people to defeat all his and our enemies!

And then chapter 6 tells us of the "resurrection" of the ark.

God had struck down Eli and his sons on the same day that he had removed the ark from Shiloh.

Now the ark had been restored from exile,

but the priesthood was still in doubt.

The man of God had spoken in 2:35 of a faithful priest,

but God had said, *I will raise up for myself a faithful priest.*

Where was that faithful priest?

Until God raised up the faithful priest,

the ark remained in a consecrated exile in the house of Abinadab,

under the care of his son, Eleazar.

This mini-exile is echoed in louder and longer terms in the great exile of 586 BC.

Instead of seven months, it was 70 years.

Instead of the ark held captive, the temple was destroyed altogether.

Instead of 20 years of limbo with the ark in Kiriath Jearim, awaiting a faithful priest,

it was 500 years of silence, awaiting the son of David,
the prophet, priest and king, who would restore all things.

Meanwhile, with the ark at Kiriath-Jearim awaiting the faithful priest,
Samuel, the prophet of God, spoke to the house of Israel
(in other words, while you are waiting for God to act,
do not sit on your hands, but repent and believe!
Waiting on the LORD does not mean being passive, but is an active trusting!)

Here in chapter 7 there are lots of verbal parallels back to the first “Ebenezer” in chapter 4.
In chapter 4, Israel was struck down by the Philistines (verses 2, 3, and 10) –
in chapter 7, the Philistines are struck down by Israel (v10)
In chapter 4, the Israelites try manipulation – “let the ark save” (v3) –
in chapter 7, the Israelites turn to repentance – “Let God save” (v3, 8).
In both cases the Philistines “hear” (4:6 and 7:7).

And the result of chapter 4 is Ichabod – the glory departs.
The result of chapter 7 is Ebenezer – the stone of help.

1. Returning to the LORD... (v3-6)

a. Requires Directing Your Heart to God and Getting Rid of Idols (v3-4)

³ *And Samuel said 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 Ashtaroath 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.”*

The language of “returning” is very much the language of repentance.
And you can see that in the way that verse 3 puts it.

If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart –
then there are two parts to this:

First, put away the foreign gods.

Second, direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only.

Our Shorter Catechism puts it this way:

“Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin,
and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ,
does, with grief and hatred of his sin,
turn from it, unto God, with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience.”

Israel has seen the mercy of God in Christ.

The ark of the covenant – the presence of God with us –

has gone before them, descending into the hell of the temple of Dagon –
and so now they see their own sin against God,

and so they turn away from their idols
in order to serve the living and true God.

And so the people of Israel did as Samuel said.
They put away the *Baalim* and the *Ashtaroth*

⁴ *So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and they served the LORD only.*

Baal and Asherah were male and female deities of the Canaanites.

The gods of the ancient world encouraged sexual self-expression.
The rituals of the pagan temples involved sexual indulgence.
You may recall from chapter 2 that Eli's sons were condemned by God
because they would lay with the women who served in the tabernacle –
in other words, they perverted the worship of God to serve their own lust.
They were acting as though Yahweh was a god like the other gods.

In our own day, we see the return of the ancient gods.
Baal and Asherah can be found everywhere on the internet –
our culture has glorified sexual self-expression,
to the point where once again,
everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

But the LORD says, “direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only.”
Turn away from the gods of the nations.
Direct your heart to the LORD!

If you are in Christ – then you are no longer a slave to sin and death.
What are you going to do with your heart?
Paul says, *set your hearts on things above* – not on earthly things. (Col 3:1)
What are “earthly things” – according to Paul?

In Colossians 3, verse 5, Paul is very clear what he means by earthly things:

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you:^[b]
sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness,
which is idolatry.

⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming.^[c]

⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them.

⁸ But now you must put them all away:
anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.

⁹ Do not lie to one another,
seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices
¹⁰ and have put on the new self,
which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

This is what Samuel is saying in 1 Samuel 7.
Direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only.
Do not let yourself be distracted
by the deceptions of the world, the flesh, and the devil!

But notice in verse 5, that Samuel recognizes that returning to the LORD requires a mediator!

b. Requires a Mediator (v5-6)

⁵ Then Samuel said, “Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you.”

Samuel is the mediator who intercedes with the LORD for the people.

All through the OT, we see the principle of the mediator.

A mediator is one who stands in between two others.

OT mediators stood between God and the people –
with the drawback that they were sinners like the rest of us!

But they pointed forward to the *one* who could stand between God and man –
because he was truly God *and* truly man!

As Hebrews 9:15 says,

“Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.”

But notice how Samuel mediates!

⁶ So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the LORD and fasted on that day and said there, “We have sinned against the LORD.” And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah.

Why did they draw water?

Water was a precious commodity in Israel.

To pour water on the ground was an image of futility,

as the wise woman of Tekoa says in 2 Samuel 14:14,

*We must all die; we are like water spilled on the ground
which cannot be gathered up again.*

Water is also an image of judgment in scripture.

The water of the flood, the water of the Red Sea, the water of the Jordan River,

God frequently used water as a means of judgment (and blessing) in the OT.

So they poured water out upon the ground and fasted–

they deprived themselves of even the necessary things of life,

because they acknowledged that the only thing necessary was the mercy of God.

We have sinned against the LORD.

If the LORD does not have mercy upon us,

then what is the use of food and water?

We in the modern church do not fast enough.

We are self-indulgent.

We are proud.

Fasting is foreign to our lifestyle of perpetual feasting!

Have you ever devoted a full day to fasting and prayer?

It's hard.

But it is a valuable thing

to humble yourself and acknowledge that if God does not have mercy upon us,
what is the use of bread and water?

But if you are going to return to the LORD

you need to start by saying, "You, O God, are more important than anything else!"

Of course, when you return to the LORD –

your enemies won't like it!

c. Requires an Ascension (Burnt) Offering (v7-9)

⁷ Now when the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel.

The world – the flesh – and the devil – are arrayed against you.

The world refers to those who are opposed to God –

in this case, the Philistines (and especially the lords of the Philistines).

The flesh refers to our own weakness –

in this case, the people of Israel "were afraid of the Philistines."

And the devil refers to the Evil One – the accuser of the brethren –

who is seeking to destroy us.

Paul tells us that we need to recognize that our warfare is not physical but spiritual.

Satan will use all sorts of weapons against us –

but we are called to

¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Eph 6)

And – by the way – Samuel says that OT warfare was primarily *spiritual warfare* as well!

And when the people of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines. ⁸ And 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." ⁹ So Samuel took a nursing lamb and offered it as a whole

burnt offering to the LORD.

Because when the people all come together in their corporate fast,
the Philistines hear of it, and fear that Israel is preparing to rebel.
And they see it as an opportunity to reassert their authority over Israel.
And so they gather together to strike Israel,
and the people were afraid, because they were not prepared to do battle!
And so they 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.*

But notice what Samuel does.

Samuel took a nursing lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering –
what is perhaps better translated an “ascension” offering –
because the idea is that the flesh of the animal is transformed into smoke,
which ascends to the LORD as a sweet aroma.

The word translated “offering” is *qorban* – which means “to draw near.”
So a burnt offering is quite literally, an ascent – drawing near to God!

When you offer a burnt offering – you are symbolically drawing near the deity.
You are saying, in effect, we are here to worship you –
we are here to draw near to you.

Samuel cried to the LORD both in word and in deed.

d. Results in the Victory of God (v10-11)

And Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him.

This is what Psalm 99 refers to when it says,
“Samuel also... called to the LORD and he answered”

Samuel the prophet spoke to man on behalf of God,
and he spoke to God on behalf of man.
He interceded for the people—as a priest offering the sacrifice,
and as a prophet speaking to the LORD.

And the LORD heard him.

¹⁰ As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel. But the LORD thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion, and they were defeated before Israel. ¹¹ And the men of Israel went out from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them, as far as below Beth-car.

The LORD thundered forth and routed the Philistines.

The same God who went before his people and cast down Dagon –
the Philistine god –
now thunders from the heavens and threw the Philistine army into confusion.

Israel no longer trusts in manipulation to save them.
They are now walking by faith – trusting the LORD.

“At the heart of Israel’s experience of mercy stands her own helplessness
and utter lack of resources;
prayer is her only recourse.” (Davis, 75)
We are so used to strategies, techniques, and gimmicks,
that we neglect prayer.
God may have to remove all of our props for support.
(For Israel, he had to take away the ark of the covenant!)

Do we really believe that God is able to do what he has promised?

2. The Commemoration of the LORD’s Triumph: Ebenezer (v12-14)

¹² Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen^[a] and called its name Ebenezer;^[b] for he said, “Till now the LORD has helped us.” ¹³ So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel. And the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. ¹⁴ The cities that the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath, and Israel delivered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. There was peace also between Israel and the Amorites.

This is the establishment of Ebenezer—the stone of help.
The first Ebenezer was in the coastal plain near the foothills of Ephraim.
That was the place where Israel was defeated,
the ark was captured,
and the two sons of Eli killed.

But now Samuel sets up a stone in Benjamin, near Mizpah,
and called its name “Ebenezer.”
The death of the priests and the capture of the ark
turns out to be the means that God used to overthrow the Philistines.
Samuel is teaching the people that God’s triumph comes through our weakness.
The LORD brought judgment upon his own priests and his own people at Ebenezer.
But his purpose is to bring Israel through suffering to glory.

*2. Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by thy help I'm come;
and I hope, by thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home.*

*Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God:
he, to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood.*

What is Ebenezer for?

Ebenezer is a monument – a sign – pointing Israel to the faithfulness of God.
We need monuments like this.
Because in the middle of dark and difficult times –
we may tend to forget!

Ebenezer is the place where God himself is brought under the power of his foes.
Ebenezer is the place where “Ichabod” is pronounced–“no glory.”

The glory has departed.

Ebenezer is the place where darkness falls,
where the lights go out.

When news comes from Ebenezer
the blind priest falls over backward and dies;
the pregnant woman gives birth to a son, and then dies.

And yet when God himself is brought under the power of the devil,
when our Lord Jesus Christ descends into hell,
he casts Dagon on his face, binds the strong man,
and plunders his house,
rescuing his people from the bonds of sin and death.

And so even as Samuel saw that Ebenezer turned from Ichabod to Glory,
so also the cross.

The cross is our Ebenezer!

3. The Ministry of Samuel: Bethel, Gilgal, Mizpah, and Ramah (v15-17)

¹⁵ Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. ¹⁶ And he went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah. And he judged Israel in all these places. ¹⁷ Then he would return to Ramah, for his home was there, and there also he judged Israel. And he built there an altar to the LORD.

The last three verses then talk about the ordinary ministry of Samuel.

The establishment of Ebenezer was extraordinary!
But extraordinary moments are – by definition – not ordinary!

For many years, Samuel goes about the ordinary ministry of judging Israel
in a circuit of Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah –
all clustered in the heart of Ephraim and Manasseh.
Gilgal is along the Jordan River –
the rest are in the hill country of Ephraim.

So Samuel “judged Israel” –
but he doesn’t seem to have gone very far outside of his own tribe.
And he builds an altar to the LORD at Ramah – his home town.

Why does he do that?
Well, the ark of the covenant is still in its sojourn at the house of Abinadab
in Kiriath-Jearim.
The tabernacle at Shiloh (the house of God) is gone.

Where are you supposed to worship the LORD?
In Deuteronomy God had said that Israel was to worship him
at the place that God would choose.
But what do you do when God hasn’t chosen yet?!

Well, that’s not quite true!
God has chosen Samuel.
He has spoken through his prophet.

And in these last days, God has spoken through his Son!
And yet – like in the days of Samuel,
things are not really as they should be –
we are not really as we should be.

And so we walk by faith – and we do what the Lord Jesus puts in front of us to do.