

Here I Raise My Ebenezer

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, if we could, with the Lord's help and the Lord's enabling this morning, if we could turn back to that portion of Scripture that we read. 1 Samuel chapter 7.
- 1 Samuel chapter 7. And if we take as our text the words of verse 12. 1 Samuel chapter 7. And verse 12. Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer.
- For he said, Till now the Lord has helped us. But you know, I love the way the authorized version puts it. He set up the stone, called its name Ebenezer, and said, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.
- Hitherto hath the Lord helped us. You know, have you ever had deja vu? The feeling where you think that you've seen something before, you've been somewhere before.
- [1 : 1 7] Whether it's a person you've met or a place you went to. You feel that you've seen it all before somewhere. Maybe you feel you've seen it in a dream. Deja vu, if you've had it, I'm sure you've had it.
- It's a strange experience that we get from time to time. And apparently the phrase deja vu, it's a French phrase that means already seen. So deja vu, already seen.
- And you know, last Sunday evening, I had a real deja vu. Last Sunday evening I had a real deja vu because what I saw, it wasn't actually a dream. But it was something I had already seen.
- Because as you know, last Sunday evening I wasn't preaching here in Bonny Barvis. I was preaching on the other side of the island in glorious Gravar. And I always love that long drive over to Gravar.
- But I particularly enjoyed it last Sunday evening. Because as I was driving through South Lochs, and I was once again reminded there of the Lord's faithfulness.
- [2 : 1 6] The Lord's faithfulness throughout another year. And it was deja vu because, well, last Christmas, if you remember, last Christmas 2022, I was preaching in glorious Gravar last Christmas on Sunday evening.
- And I was reminded of the same thing last Christmas on the Sunday evening. I was reminded of the Lord's faithfulness throughout 2022. And so then last Sunday evening, I was reminded of the Lord's faithfulness throughout 2023.
- And what reminded me of the Lord's faithfulness was a little standing stone that stands at the side of the road in South Lochs.
- I don't know if you've ever seen the standing stone. If you haven't seen it, go for a spin if you're on holiday and find it. Because when you drive through Balalan, as you know, you drive through Balalan, and then you take a left turn at the end of Balalan, and you turn off towards glorious Gravar.
- And after navigating a few of the tight bends towards Gravar, you'll pass the Loch Erisort Inn, or the Clayture Hotel, as it was previously known. And then about 50 yards after that, on the right-hand side, you'll encounter a small, single, standing stone in the village of Shieldanish.

- [3 : 34] And for most people, this little standing stone in the village of Shieldanish, it goes unnoticed, and it remains unimportant to many people who pass it.
- But there's a story behind that single standing stone in the village of Shieldanish. It wasn't a stone that was erected during the Bronze Age, like our Calvinish stones just along the road.
- This single standing stone in Shieldanish was put up in the 1980s. And it was put up by a man called Donald Murdo Ferguson. He's actually an elder in the Church of Scotland in Kinloch.
- And at the time, Donald Murdo, he had been working on the road in Loch's. You remember how the road used to be single track all the way, but then they doubled the road. They made it, you could say, they dueled it all the way to Garry Vaart.
- And while he was working on the road in this digger, he found this stone lying on a ledge. And with the permission of the council, Donald Murdo, he put up this single standing stone in Shieldanish at the side of the road.
- [4 : 41] And then he put a plaque on it. And the plaque read, Ebenezer, hitherto hath the Lord helped us. Ebenezer, hitherto hath the Lord helped us.
- But now with over 40 years having passed, since that single small standing stone in Shieldanish was first erected. Donald Murdo, in fact, he celebrated his 101st birthday this year.
- So he'll probably be 102 if he's spared to see it next year. But since putting up that single standing stone in Shieldanish, he has celebrated his 101st birthday.
- But the plaque that was on it has corroded and fallen off. But amazingly, the single standing stone in Shieldanish, it still stands. And it still stands on the side of the road as a symbol and as a testimony to the Lord's faithfulness throughout every single year.
- And you know, it was as I passed it, that Ebenezer stone in Shieldanish, as I passed it last Sunday evening on the way to Glorious Graver. I was pointing it out to the boys.
- [5 : 56] We even slowed down to look at it. It was then that I had deja vu because I was once again reminded of the Lord's faithfulness throughout yet another year. The Lord's faithfulness throughout yet another year.
- And you know, at this time of year, there's often a lot of excitement and enthusiasm as people enjoy the festive season. Families come together, as you know, there's food, there's children having fun.
- But even though this time of year is often happy for some, it's a time of year that's heartbreaking for others. Because it's at this time of year that people are reminded, they're reminded of the empty places and the empty spaces in their homes and among their family.
- And you know, we should always be mindful of that, that at this time of year, that this time of year, it's happy for some, but heartbreaking for others. This time of year is happy for some, but heartbreaking for others.
- And with every passing year, there are so many changes that take place. And yet, despite all the changes in the circumstances and situations in our lives, the beautiful thing is the Lord doesn't change.
- [7 : 06] The Lord doesn't change. And it's for that reason, as we come to the end of another year, we too must confess with Samuel and say, Here I raise my Ebenezer, hitherto hath the Lord helped us.
- Here I raise my Ebenezer, hitherto hath the Lord helped us. And you know, I want us just to look at this passage briefly this morning. I want us to look at it under two headings.

First of all, repentance and then remembrance. Repentance and then remembrance. So repentance, first of all. Look at verse one. We read there, And the men of Kiriath-Jerim came and took up the ark of the Lord and brought it into the house of Abinadab on the hill.

And they consecrated his son Eliezer to have charge of the ark of the Lord. From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-Jerim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord.

As you know, the prophet Samuel, he was born during a tough and turbulent transition period within the nation of Israel.

[8 : 20] Because since the time of the Exodus with Moses and then entering the promised land with Joshua, it was during that, after that time, the judges ruled in the land of Israel.

And they ruled for generations. But with each generation, there was this cycle, a continuous cycle of rebellion and then restoration. Rebellion and restoration.

Rebellion and restoration. And what would happen each and every generation was that the Israelites, they would rebel against the Lord in idolatry. The Lord would punish them because they turned away from the Lord.

And the Lord would punish them by raising up an evil tyrant to rule over them. The Israelites would then see, sense, and they would repent of their sin. And the Lord would hear their cry.

And the Lord would raise up a judge who would rescue the Israelites from bondage. And for a period of time, there would be a restoration. There was this sorry saga that continued time and time again.

[9 : 21] There was this cycle of rebellion and restoration all the way through the book of Judges. The period of the judges was a sorry saga that even concludes with that statement, that well-known statement at the end of the book of Judges.

There was no king in Israel. Every man did that which was right in his own eyes. It was a tough and turbulent period. But it was into that tough and turbulent period that Samuel was born.

But Samuel, as you know, he was a child that was earnestly prayed for. Because for many years, Samuel's mother, Hannah, she was unable to have children, but the Lord graciously answered Hannah's prayer and gifted her a son.

But Samuel was a special son. Samuel was set apart to serve the Lord. And from a young age, Hannah dedicated and devoted Samuel to the service of the Lord.

And you know, one of my favorite passages, we'll actually come to it in January, one of my favorite passages in the Bible is when the Lord called Samuel to serve him. In 1 Samuel 3, we read that while Samuel was sleeping, the Lord called to Samuel saying, Samuel, Samuel.

[10 : 39] But the young Samuel, he didn't recognize the Lord's voice that was calling him. And Samuel, he got up thinking it was Eli the priest who was talking to him. And so he gets out of bed and he goes to speak to Eli the priest.

But it's then that Eli realizes that it's actually the Lord that is speaking to Samuel. And so when the Lord called to Samuel for the third time, when the Lord said, Samuel, Samuel, Samuel had been told to respond to the Lord and say, speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening. Which is how we should always respond when the Lord is calling us to serve him. We should always say to the Lord, speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

But as we said, Samuel was born into a tough and turbulent period. A period within the nation of Israel that was difficult. Because in chapters 4 to 7, we read about these battles that the Israelites had.

It was a series of battles between the Israelites and the Philistines. The first battle had ended in defeat with the Philistines. The Israelites, they were defeated and they had 4,000 soldiers killed.

[11 : 53] But instead of humbly retreating, instead of going home and thinking, well, we shouldn't fight the Philistines anymore, the Israelites came back. They responded by retaliating.

And they foolishly retaliated by returning to the battlefield carrying the Ark of the Covenant. And you remember the Ark of the Covenant, it was that holy golden box which sat inside the Holy of Holies.

The funny thing about Christmas TV at this time of year, you often see Indiana Jones and his search for the lost Ark. And that's the Ark he was looking for, this Ark of the Covenant.

But the Ark of the Covenant symbolically symbolized the throne of God. It symbolized God's presence and God's power amongst His people.

But the Israelites, they foolishly treated the Ark of the Covenant like a lucky charm. They thought that if they brought the Ark of the Covenant into the battlefield with them, then the Lord would protect them and the Lord would preserve them and the Lord would keep them from any hurt and any harm.

[13 : 04] And you know, I often think that people, many people, foolishly treat the things of God like a lucky charm. They think that if they carry a Bible or if they even read the Bible every day and make sure that they read the Bible every day or if they repeat a prayer every day or if they attend church week by week, then the Lord will always protect them and preserve them from hurt or harm.

But as you know, that's not the case. And that's not what happened to the Israelites. Because during their second battle with the Philistines, 30,000 Israelites were killed.

So it was 4,000 the first time, then it was 30,000 the second time. They were all killed and then the Ark of the Covenant was captured. The Ark of the Covenant was taken by the Philistines.

And then you come to that comedy scene in chapter 5. And that's why I'm looking forward to going back to our study in 1 Samuel. Because in 1 Samuel chapter 5, the Philistines, they place the Ark of the Covenant, they place it in the same temple as their god, Dagon.

The Philistines, you could say, they sat the Lord side by side with their god, Dagon. But every morning, you read in chapter 5, every morning the Israelites, the Philistines, went in to the temple to worship Dagon.

[14 : 24] They found him face down. He was face down, prostrate, on the floor in front of the Ark of the Covenant. And even though the Philistines, they would rush in and they would put Dagon back onto his perch and place him in his prominent position in the temple when they would go in to worship Dagon.

The following morning, he would be flat on his face once again before the Lord. He would be before the Ark of the Covenant. And of course, the Lord was showing the Philistines that he didn't need anything.

The Lord didn't need anyone to defend him because the Lord can do that all by himself. Just like the Lord doesn't need us to defend him. The Lord doesn't need us or his cause to defend his cause or his church or his word.

The Lord can do all of that by himself. The Lord can defend himself. Even the Lord says that he's building his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

And he's doing it all by himself. But you know, when it came to the Philistines, the Lord brought tumors and terror upon them.

[15 : 35] So much so that after seven months of misery, the Philistines put the Ark of the Covenant onto a cart and they sent it back to Israel. And so by the time we come to this chapter, chapter seven, the Ark of the Covenant has been returned to the Israelites.

But it's now located, as we read there in verses one and two, it's located in this unusual place with an unusual name. It's in Kiriath-Jerim. And as we read, the Ark of the Covenant has been at Kiriath-Jerim for not one year or two years or three years, but for nearly 20 years.

The Ark of the Covenant has been at Kiriath-Jerim for nearly 20 years, which might seem strange to us that this hallowed and holy piece of furniture was just left there, neglected.

The Ark of the Covenant was neglected in Kiriath-Jerim for nearly 20 years. But you know, not to show us straight away the spiritual temperature of God's people.

The Israelites, they had grown cold. They had grown casual. They had become complacent towards the Lord. The Israelites, they had, you could say, they had digressed.

[16 : 52] They had deviated. They had drifted in their commitment to the Lord. They had fallen away from being focused and fixated with the Lord. And you know, similar to our own nation today, the nation of Israel was in a spiritual state.

It was in a spiritual state requiring repentance. And that's why Samuel calls them to repentance. He calls them to turn away from their sin, to turn away from their slothfulness, to turn away from their slumber, and to turn back to the Lord.

You look at verse 3. See, 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.

So Samuel called the people to remove their idols, to repent of their idolatry, and to return to the Lord. Samuel called the people to remove their idols, repent of their idolatry, and return to the Lord.

Remove, repent, return. And the people responded. Samuel said, remove, repent, return, and the people responded.

[18 : 14] We see that they resolved to removing their idols, they repented of their idolatry, and they returned to the Lord. They did as they were commanded. They removed, they repented, they returned.

And you know, you come to a passage like this, and you think, well, as we approach a new year, you know, many people, they make New Year's resolutions. I don't know if you're planning on making one for tomorrow.

I've got one. Lose a bit more weight. Some people might want to give up alcohol for the month of January. Others might want to stop smoking altogether.

Whatever it is, it's usually something we know that's bad for us. That's why we make New Year's resolutions. But here, our Bible is giving us a New Year's resolution we all need to commit to.

Whether you're a Christian or not, we need to resolve to removing our idols, our things that become number one in life above God.

[19 : 15] We need to remove our idols, then repent of our idolatry. We need to say sorry to the Lord for not making Him number one in our life.

We need to resolve to removing our idols, repenting of our idolatry, and returning to the Lord. We need to remove, repent, and return.

And you know, if you've never had a New Year's resolution, then that's one for 2024. Because we all need to. We all need to. We all do it. We all make idols of something or someone.

We all need to resolve to removing our idols, repenting of our idolatry, and returning back to the Lord. Because what we see with the Israelites is that after 20 years of being distant from the Lord, and being cold and casual with the Lord, after 20 years, doubt had crept in.

Dismay had crept in. When the Israelites, they were so distant from the Lord, they wondered if the Lord was even for them at all. But when the Israelites heard the words of Samuel to remove the idols, to repent of the idolatry, to return to the Lord, that's when we, as you go through the passage, that's when they finally defeated the Philistines and committed their lives to the Lord.

[20 : 42] And you know, there are so many people, so many people you speak to and they've been living for 20 plus years in doubt, living in dismay about their soul, wondering, am I really a Christian?

Am I really saved? How, if, how, and when will I be one of the Lords? If, how, and when will I be a Christian? But you know, my friend, it's all here for us in the Bible that when you make this your New Year's resolution, to remove the idol from being number one, to repent of your sin and to return to the Lord.

The day you repent will be a reason to rejoice. The day you repent will be a reason to rejoice. But not only a reason to rejoice, a reason to remember.

A reason to remember. That's what we see secondly. Because when the Israelites, when they repented, it was not only a reason to rejoice, there was a reason to remember.

That's what we see secondly. So there's repentance first of all, then there's remembrance. Remembrance. Look at verse 12. Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer.

[22 : 01] For he said, Till now or hitherto hath the Lord helped us. So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter their territory of Israel. And the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel.

After 20 years of doubt and dismay of being distant from the Lord, casual and complacent with the Lord, the day the Israelites defeated the Philistines was a day to rejoice and a day to remember.

Which is why we're told that Samuel took a stone and he set it up as a memorial stone to the Lord. And as we read, Samuel gave the stone a name.

He called the stone Ebenezer, Ebenezer, which means stone of helping. Ebenezer means stone of helping. And as you know, memorial stones or remembrance stones, they're very common.

We see memorial stones and remembrance stones throughout our island. We see them in graveyards where we have memorial stones to people we love and those whom we have lost.

[23 : 11] We have remembrance stones to remember local land raids or local land fights or even world wars. We have memorial stones. But memorial stones and remembrance stones are not only common throughout our island communities.

They're common throughout the Bible because they're biblical. We read of men such as Noah and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Elijah.

They all built stones to remember the Lord's provision. and the Lord's protection. They all built stones to remember the Lord's provision and the Lord's protection.

And you know, when you read about those stones throughout the Bible, I've always found it interesting that Solomon says in Ecclesiastes chapter 3, that well-known chapter in the Bible where Solomon writes, he says, to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven, a time to be born and a time to die.

But as you read through those different times in life, Solomon also writes, a time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together.

[24 : 25] And for Samuel, this was a time to gather stones together, or in Samuel's case, to gather one stone, one particular stone, and set it up as a memorial stone and confess, here I raise my Ebenezer, hitherto hath the Lord helped us.

What a confession. Here I raise my Ebenezer, hitherto hath the Lord helped us. And you know, at the end of a difficult and dark period in Israel's history, Samuel couldn't but acknowledge and appreciate that his help came from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

And as we come to the end of another year in our lives, you know, the Lord is the only one we can truly acknowledge and appreciate for His protection and His provision, for His grace and His goodness, for His healing and His help.

Because He alone is the maker of heaven and earth. And like Samuel, at the end of another year in our lives, we need to stop. On a day like today, we need to stop and say, Lord, here I raise my Ebenezer, hitherto hath the Lord helped me.

Here I raise my Ebenezer, hitherto hath the Lord helped me. Because undoubtedly, there have been many, many exciting and encouraging events in our lives.

[25 : 55] There have been new beginnings and new builds and new births. And for these, we ought to be thankful. For these things, we should say with Samuel, hitherto the Lord has helped us. But human nature being what it is, these exciting and encouraging events are often overlooked and overshadowed by all the discouraging disappointments that we face in life.

and like it was in Samuel's day, 2023 has been happy for some but heartbreaking for others. It has been happy for some and heartbreaking for others.

2023 has been a tough and turbulent year for many people where a lot has changed, not only in our lives as a congregation but also as a community, even as a country.

And like every year before it, 2023 has once again reminded us, has it not, of the frailty and the fragility of life. Because whether we've encountered or experienced a tough trial or turbulence, the turbulence of sin or sickness or suffering or sorrow or stress or separation, whatever it may be, we've all come to see and be sure that there's nothing in life, there's nothing in life that is stable, strong, and secure apart from our Savior.

There is nothing in life that is stable, strong, and secure apart from our Savior. And you know, that's why Paul could write at the end of that beautiful chapter in Romans 8, he says, for I am persuaded.

[27 : 39] And you know, it maybe took a lot to persuade Paul, but he was persuaded that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come neither height nor depth nor any other creature is able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

You know, my friend, as we go into a new year, we must keep looking to the Lord and saying with Samuel, here I raise my Ebenezer, hitherto hath the Lord helped us.

Hitherto hath the Lord helped us. And you know that phrase, and with this, I'll close this morning, the phrase, here I raise my Ebenezer, that beautiful phrase, the phrase, here I raise my Ebenezer, it's actually taken from a hymn, a hymn that was written in 1758 by Reverend Robert Robinson.

Not Robert Robertson, the singer, but Reverend Robert Robinson. It was written shortly after his conversion where Robert Robinson, he wrote this well-known hymn, a hymn maybe you've read it before, where he writes, Come thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace, streams of mercy never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise, teach me some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming tongues above, praise the mount I'm fixed upon it, mount of thy redeeming love.

But you know, because Robert Robinson had come to experience and enjoy God's goodness and God's grace, he rejoiced to write in verse 2, this is what he wrote, here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by thy help I come, and I hope by thy good pleasure safely to arrive at home.

[29 : 40] Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God, he to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood. Oh, to grace how great a debtor, daily I'm constrained to be, let that grace now like a fetter bind my wandering heart to thee, prone to wonder, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love, here's my heart, oh take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.

It's a beautiful hymn that reminds us at the end of another year in life's journey, we should stop and say with Samuel, here I raise my Ebenezer, hitherto, hitherto hath the Lord helped us, hitherto hath the Lord helped us.

May the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray. Oh Lord, our gracious God, we give thanks for even the opportunity this morning to consider what thy word is saying to us and that thy word encourages us to stop and to consider what the Lord has done in our lives thus far and that even as we consider what the Lord has done and how faithful he has been and how he has always been an ever-present help, oh Lord, enable us this morning to confess with Samuel that here I raise my Ebenezer, hitherto hath the Lord helped us.

Lord, bless us, we pray. Watch over us, we ask. Prepare us for another year in life's journey, whatever that year will entail for any of us.

Help us, Lord, we pray, to cast everything into thy hand for thou art the God who knows, who knows the end from the beginning for thou art the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

[31 : 52] Keep us then, we pray, by thy grace for we ask it in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen. We're going to bring our service to a conclusion this morning.

We'll sing in Psalm 103. Psalm 103, it's in the Sing Psalms version, page 135. Psalm 103, we're singing from the beginning down to the verse from Mark 11.

How should we respond to the Lord at the end of another year? In Psalm 103, it's a psalm that reminds us that the God we worship is a God of all grace.

And that's what we see in these verses. How do we respond to the Lord? The psalmist says, praise God my soul with all my heart. Let me exalt his holy name.

Forget not all his benefits. His praise my soul in song proclaim. The Lord forgives you all your sins and heals your sickness and distress. Your life he rescues from the grave and crowns you in his tenderness.

[33 : 06] And we'll sing on down to the end of the verse, Mark 11, so verses 1 to 11 of Psalm 103. And we'll stand to sing, if you're able, to God's praise. praise God my soul with all my heart.

Let me exalt his holy name. Forget not all his benefits.

His praise my soul and song proclaim. The Lord forgives you all your sins and heals your sickness and distress.

Your life he rescues from the grave and crowns you and crowns you in his tenderness.

And crowns you in his tenderness. He satisfies your deep desire from his unending and distorts of good so that just like the eagles men, your youthful vacations we knew.

[34 : 50] The Lord is known for righteousness and justice to turn throdens to Moses he made no disques his mighty deeds to Israel's sons.

his mighty deeds to Israel's sons. The Lord is merciful and kind to anger slow and full of grace he will not constantly reprove or a disanget height his face.

He does not punish our mistakes or give our sins their just reward.

the Lord how great his love as high as heaven towards all those who fear the Lord towards all those who fear the Lord the Lord the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forevermore.

Amen. Amen. Amen.