

## **Ebenezer: Remembering the Past, Trusting the Future**

### **1 Samuel 7:3–17**

#### **Loss is evidence of love**

Earlier this week, I was having coffee with one of our church members, and they looked at the gray hair on my head and said, “Did all that happen while you were with us?” When I first came here, I had a lot more black hair. Seven years later, I have a lot more gray hair. But that is not because of you. That is because of time. You have shown me so much love, and for that I am deeply grateful.

Over these past seven years, we have built trust together. We have shared love. We have walked together in faith. So I know many of you were surprised and unsettled by the unexpected news last week, that I have been appointed to a new church. I am sorry that this news has brought sadness to some of you. But I will tell you honestly, part of me also feels grateful.

Because if a pastor says, “I’m leaving for another church,” and the congregation either cheers or feels nothing at all, that would be a little strange, wouldn’t it? The fact that this hurts means there has been love. The fact that there is a sense of loss means we have truly shared life together. When love has been deep, parting is painful. So from the bottom of my heart, thank you. Thank you for loving me, for receiving me, and for walking with me these past seven years.

Many of you have asked, “Do you know who the next pastor will be?” No, I do not know yet. But I trust that the bishop and cabinet are prayerfully discerning who would be the right pastor for this church. And so I hope we will all pray for the pastor who will come next.

I think many people are asking that question because you are holding both hope and anxiety about the future of this church. That is understandable. A new chapter always brings both anticipation and uncertainty. But my Asbury family, do not be too afraid of this season of change. And if your heart feels uneasy, then listen again to today’s Scripture.

#### **The Philistines and Israel**

Today’s passage shows us what happened after Israel won a victory over the Philistines. Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen, and he named it Ebenezer. The Philistines were a powerful enemy. For a long time, they had threatened Israel again and again. This was hardly a fair fight. Israel was weak. The Philistines were strong. Humanly speaking, Israel did not stand much of a chance.

If you go back to chapter 4, you see just how badly Israel had been defeated before. More than thirty thousand men died, and even the ark of the covenant, the sign of God’s presence, was taken away. People were devastated. Some even cried out, “The glory has departed from Israel.” The ark eventually returned by the power of God, but the threat of the Philistines remained.

So what did Israel need in order to survive? Better weapons? A stronger army? More training? That is what we might expect. But Samuel says something very different. He tells the people to put away their idols and return to God. “Direct your heart to the Lord, and serve God only, and God will deliver you.” That is one of the great truths of Scripture. When trouble comes, trust God. When life takes a turn you did not expect, trust God. When you do not know what comes next, trust God.

But let us be honest. That is not easy. It is easy to say, “Trust God,” when life is calm. It is much harder to trust God when the storm is already shaking the boat. John Wesley knew something about that. On the voyage across the Atlantic to Georgia, he was caught in a violent

storm. He was terrified. But then he noticed a group of Moravian Christians praying with deep peace. Their calm shook him. And it led him to ask a painful question: “Do I really trust God?” Sometimes faith becomes clearest not when life is peaceful, but when life is shaken.

### **Looking Back and Turning Back**

So what do we do when we are afraid? We look back, and we turn back. Samuel gathered the people at Mizpah so that they might repent, pray, and return to God. But when the Philistines heard that Israel had gathered, they assumed Israel was preparing for war, so they came to attack again. And the Israelites were afraid.

But Samuel cried out to God. He called the people to pray. And then something amazing happened. As the Philistines drew near, God thundered against them. They were thrown into confusion, and Israel won a great victory.

Now imagine that moment. What did the people of Israel think when they heard that thunder? I believe it was more than just a sound in the sky. It was a holy reminder. It called back the memory of Sinai, where God met their ancestors in thunder and power. It reminded them that the God who brought them out of Egypt, the God who led them through the wilderness, the God who met them at Sinai, was still with them. So the victory at Mizpah was not just a military victory. It was a spiritual awakening. It was a day of remembering. A day of returning. A day of realizing once again: God had not left them.

### **Thus Far**

After the victory, Samuel set up a stone and said, “Thus far the Lord has helped us.” And he named that stone Ebenezer. I love that phrase: “Thus far.” Because when you look back, you realize that God had never abandoned Israel. God guided them. God was patient with them. God saved them. Again and again.

And the same is true for us. God has helped us thus far. When I look back on these last seven years, so many memories come to mind. One of the biggest, of course, was the COVID-19 pandemic. Suddenly everything changed. We could not gather in person. The church building was quiet. And I remember wondering, “Will the church survive this?” But look where we are. We are still here. God has helped us thus far.

Since I came to Asbury, I have officiated 21 funerals. I have stood beside grieving families. I have said goodbye to beloved members who were like pillars of this church. And there were moments when I wondered, “Can this church make it through this season?” But look where we are. We are still here. God has helped us thus far.

Over these past seven years, we have not simply survived. We have continued to grow by the grace of God. Last Easter, Elizabeth and Samuel were baptized, and because of them, the average age of our church got a little younger. And before long, Estelle will be born into this world as well. After being paused for many years, Vacation Bible School has started again, and we are making a real effort to invest in the next generation. The Food for Soul ministry, which began right after COVID-19, has grown into a ministry that serves neighbors in need in our community. God has helped us thus far.

But has God helped us only in the last seven years? Of course not. Think about the 96-year history of this church. Think about that big tree in our church yard. From the time it was first planted until it became the large, beautiful tree it is today, how many storms has it seen? How many ups and downs has this church been through? And yet, we are still here. God has helped us thus far.

When I look back, I can see that God was with us in every season. In the joyful times, God was with us. In the painful times, God was with us. In times of laughter, and in times of tears, God was with us. And thus far, the Lord has helped us.

So today, church, that is what I want you to remember. What we need in this season is not to be ruled by fear. What we need is to remember the God who has brought us this far. And if God has helped us this far, then surely God will help us beyond this moment too.

The God of Ebenezer does not help us only “up to here.” The God of Ebenezer is already waiting for us on the other side. So let us remember the God who has walked with us. Let us not forget the grace that has carried us. And instead of giving ourselves over to anxiety, let us prepare in prayer for the new journey God will open before us. The God of Ebenezer will guide our steps. Amen.