**Ebenezer- saved with God’s help**  1/5/22 dkm

Read: 1Samuel 7, Romans 8:26-39

Text: 1Samuel 7:7-17

Psalms: 29, 18:6-14, 116:7-14, 118:15-24, 134a

The renewal of the covenant that took place in Israel was like a revival in the church. We spoke previously about revivals in recent church history, noting that these were marked by sincere and widespread repentance, and public confession of sin. Some Christians are so eager to see a revival in the church today that they try to manufacture one. But we cannot do this; all we can do is pray and keep on faithfully preaching the gospel. Are we in the church today doing this, praying and preaching the gospel?

When Samuel was born, the Lord had not spoken to his people for a long time; they were not listening to the Lord anyway. Then the Lord spoke to Samuel, and established him as a prophet in Israel. But it seems the people did not listen to him either. When the Philistines attacked, Israel was defeated (4:2). The elders of Israel sought the Lord’s help, not by prayer but by ‘manufacturing’ his presence among them. They used to ark of the Lord like the Philistines used their idols. But the holy God of Israel would not be manipulated. Far from helping them, the Ark of the Covenant was captured and the Israelites were soundly defeated. They would spend the next two decades ignorantly worshipping idols, and being oppressed by the Philistines.

These years of darkness led to their ‘lament after the Lord’ (7:2). They came to Samuel the prophet, who told them to repent of their sin, their sin of idolatry, and ‘return to the Lord with all your heart’ (7:3). They threw out their idols and gathered at Mizpah to confess: ‘We have sinned against the Lord’ (7:6). Samuel must have rejoiced to see and hear such confession! Were these the same people that he saw going to their shrines to engage in debauched pagan worship? Revival in the church will be amazing; it will not go unnoticed!

The gathering of the children of Israel at Mizpah was noticed by the Philistines. Being pagans, they did not understand that this was a purely spiritual gathering, a gathering for confession and renewal of the covenant between Yahweh and his people. The Philistines thought the Israelites were gathering to launch an attack upon them. They responded by sending their forces to quell yet another uprising in Israel. But things had changed in Israel; the Lord had changed the hearts of the people. They still feared the Philistines but they feared the Lord more. Fear led to prayer, instead of fighting in their own strength with idols in tow. Our subheadings are: ‘Earnest prayer’, Ear-splitting thunder’, ‘Ebenezer’, and ‘Israel judged by Samuel’.

**1. Earnest prayer**

When the children of Israel heard that the Philistines were preparing their forces for invasion, they did not run for their weapons or for their idols, but asked Samuel to pray for them (7:8). They believed that the Lord their God could save them from the Philistines. Sincere repentance and confession of sin was followed by faith in ‘the Lord our God’. They believed that God ‘may save us from the hand of the Philistines’. They were no longer telling God what he must do but were asking God to help them.

The people knew God had the power to save them, and they were depending on Him alone at this stage; they would fight when he told them to fight. They also knew that through Samuel they could ask God to help them. They recognised the need for a mediator. Understanding our sin, and the holiness of God, makes a big difference to how we approach God. We have an even better mediator than Moses or Samuel because Jesus ‘ever lives to intercede for us’ (Heb 7:25). In Jesus we have a mediator who sits beside God the Father on the throne in heaven (Rom 8:34). How blessed you are if you know Jesus as your mediator, the only mediator between God and men (1Tim 2:5).

‘Do not stop crying out to the Lord our God for us’ the people said to Samuel as they heard the Philistines rattling their swords (7:8). Samuel responded by offering a suckling lamb as a burnt offering to the Lord (7:9). The high priest, when there was one, could only enter the most holy place once a year, and not without blood (Heb 9:7). Samuel the prophet was also Samuel the priest. He sacrificed an animal according to the Law of Moses in preparation for prayer (Lev 22:27). Remember that, ‘Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness’ (Heb 9:22), and without forgiveness of sin there is no entering into God’s presence with our prayers. Remember this, and remember the blood of Jesus Christ every time you pray; this is why we pray ‘in Jesus name’.

**2. Ear-splitting thunder**

After sacrificing a lamb as an offering to the Lord, ‘Samuel cried out to the Lord for Israel’, as the people asked he to do (7:9). His earnest prayer was that the Lord deliver Israel from the Philistines. We are not actually told the content of his prayer but this was what the people asked him to pray, and this is what we see in the Lord’s answer to his prayer. In fact, ‘The Philistines drew near to battle against Israel’ even as Samuel sacrificed the lamb and prayed (7:10). Anxiety and fear must have gripped the hearts of the Israelites as they watched Samuel offer up the lamb and pray to the ‘Lord our God’.

We recall another time of covenant renewal, the time when Elijah gathered the people of Israel on Mt Carmel (1Kings 18). After seeing the prophets of Baal fail with their sacrifice, the people watched Elijah repair the altar of the Lord, sacrifice a bull on this altar, and then pray to the Lord. As they watched they saw the Lord answer Elijah’s prayer with fire, fire that burned up the sacrifice, as well as the altar and the water that Elijah had poured on everything.

Two hundred years before Elijah, the children of Israel watched Samuel sacrifice a lamb and pray to the Lord. They kept watching as the Lord answered Samuel’s prayer. They saw, or rather heard, the Lord send thunder upon the Philistines, loud, ear-splitting thunder. This crashing thunder, and flashing lightning no doubt, caused panic and confusion within the Philistine camp (7:10). The details are brief but the outcome was amazing. The Philistines probably saw the hand of Israel’s God behind the storm and high-tailed it for home. They knew what it was like to offend Israel’s God, unlike our secular society.

Even Christians think nothing of offending God. Even Christians fail to see the hand of the Lord behind things happening in the world today, or behind things happening in their own life. We fail to understand that God is not only powerful to bless, but also powerful to discipline or judge. Moses spoke of blessings on obedience and curses on disobedience. A blessing was defeat of enemies and a curse being defeated by enemies (Deut 28:7, 33). Hannah, in her divinely inspired prayer said, ‘The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken in pieces; from heaven He will thunder against them. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth’ (2:10). Did Samuel hear and remember the words of his mother’s prayer? Are the words of Hannah’s prayer heard and understood by us today? Are not the disasters or catastrophes seen in the world today reminders that the end is near, and that today is the day of salvation?

**3. Ebenezer**

Thunder sent by the Lord made the Philistines flee in fear. The Israelites, who were gathered for worship at Mizpah, gave chase, striking them down all the way to below Beth Car (7:12). The number of causalities is not given, but it seems the Israelites defeated the Philistines without losing a man. What a contrast to their earlier battles when they depended on themselves rather than the Lord (cf. 4:2, 10). ‘Below Beth car’ was probably Philistine territory.

Samuel wanted the people to remember this day, the day the Lord answered his prayer and defeated the Philistines by his outstretched hand. He wanted all glory to go to the Lord for ever. While this stone no longer exists, as far as we know, the story of the Ebenezer stone is here in the Bible, and its lesson remains for us and our children.

Ebenezer means, ‘stone of help’, stone of God’s help. Just as Joshua set up a pile stones after crossing the Jordan River with God’s help, so Samuel set up this stone after God defeated the Philistines (Josh 4). Samuel declared, ‘Thus far the Lord has helped us’ (7:12). He and the people had learned that God is powerful to save, and willing to save, when his people ‘return to the Lord with all your hearts’ (7:3).

‘Thus far’ points back as well as forwards. As Christians, we look back to all the Lord has done for us, even in previous generations. We are here today because of God’s help, and especially because of his grace and power shown to us in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. Sometimes we get down, and even doubtful, about God’s help, but your very presence in God’s house today is testimony to God’s help. Some Christians talk about ‘raising my Ebenezer’ as they acknowledge the Lord’s help thus far in their lives. In terms of stones and memorials, we need nothing more than what the Lord has given us in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. This is our Ebenezer stone.

‘Thus far’ also points forward. ‘We stand in the present but dwell on the past in order that we can be steadfast for the future’. Samuel did not know the future but he knew the Lord who does not change, and who remained powerful to help his people into the future. When we take the Lord’s Supper we ‘proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes’ (1Cor 11:26). As believers, we live with a sure and certain hope, the hope of the resurrection, and the Lord’s return in glory on the clouds of heaven. The Lord does not change and his promises do not change.

Are you remembering the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and remembering his promises regarding the future? Our future is just as certain as our past as far as the Lord is concerned. So why do we fear the future like people who do not believe in Jesus, and have no hope beyond this world?

**4. Israel judged by Samuel**

‘And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life’ (7:15). We come to the conclusion of the early part of Samuel’s life; in the next chapter we find him an old man (8:1). After setting up the Ebenezer stone, the Philistines stopped harassing Israel because, ‘The hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel’ (7:13); maybe the Ebenezer stone stood as a witness to the Philistines also? Towns they had taken from Israel during the dark years were restored to Israel, and there was ‘peace between Israel and the Amorites’ (7:14). The Philistines are not normally listed among the Canaanites, but the Amorites are. Both were enemies of Israel, so maybe ‘Amorite’ is used is a very general sense in this verse.

Being judge of Israel meant more than ‘merely deciding on legal disputes, but of reproof, instruction and counsel for living under Yahweh’s lordship’. Samuel was God’s appointed leader for the nation. When the people called for a king, it was not only Samuel they were rejecting but the Lord (8:7). As judge of Israel, Samuel travelled on a circuit from Bethel to Gilgal and to Mizpah each year, hearing cases and bringing judgments from the Lord. No doubt he taught and explained the Scriptures whenever he visited these places. He always returned to his home in Ramah, where he built an altar to the Lord.

But there is no mention of the rebuilding of the tent of meeting that was at Shiloh, or of Samuel bringing the Ark of the Covenant from the house of Abinadab in Kirjath Jearim. It was as if they had taken a step back to the days of Abraham and Isaac. Moses had brought further revelation from the Lord with the building of the ark and the tabernacle, but it seems they were not ready for this revelation. When the Lord further reveals himself, it is to build upon and fulfil what he has already revealed, so let us not forget the basics of God’s holiness, God’s power, and God’s grace, even as we worship him under the new covenant declared by our Lord Jesus Christ.