

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Fifth Sunday of Easter  
Sunday, May 18, 2025**

**“And Named It Ebenezer”  
I Samuel 7:3-12**

**The Rev. Dr. David Clark**

What does the word ‘Ebenezer’ mean to you? When you hear ‘Ebenezer,’ what’s the first thing that comes to mind? My guess is Ebenezer Scrooge, right? When we hear ‘Ebenezer,’ we think of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, or we think of one of its many film adaptations—maybe that old black-and-white version that comes on around Christmas.

And yet, you may have noticed that the word ‘Ebenezer’ also appears in the Christian tradition. When I was the Interim Pastor at St. David’s Presbyterian in Campbellville, on my drive in on Guelph Line I would always pass by Ebenezer United Church. And in fact, Ebenezer is not a rare name for churches; there are a number bearing that name just in southern Ontario. Now clearly, these churches are not named after Scrooge. (If they were, then good luck running a stewardship campaign!) Rather, they’re named after Ebenezer as it appears in our Old Testament Lesson from I Samuel. So what does Ebenezer mean? And what does it teach us about the grace of God in our lives?

Our Lesson from I Samuel takes place after the Israelites had suffered a decisive military defeat. The Philistines, another people in the region, had gone to war against the Israelites (4:1); the Israelites had been badly defeated, suffering thousands of deaths before retreating from the battlefield (4:10). And not only had the Israelites lost the battle, but they had also lost the Ark of the Covenant (that held the tablets of the Law)—which was captured by the Philistines (4:11). This defeat had been so crushing that some felt that “the glory of God ha[d] departed” (4:22).

After a rather complicated series of events, the victorious Philistines decided—out of self-interest—to return the Ark to the Israelites (5:2). And our Old Testament Lesson picks up just after they had received back the Ark. At that point, Samuel called all the people to repent, to turn away from false gods and turn instead to the Living God: “If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart,” he said, “then put away the foreign gods [...] from among you. Direct your heart to the LORD, and serve him only” (v. 3). The people responded

faithfully, and Samuel had them assemble in a town near Jerusalem, so that—together—they could repent and pray: “Then Samuel said, ‘Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you.’ So they gathered at Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the LORD. They fasted that day, and said, ‘We have sinned against the LORD’” (vv. 5-6).

However, when the Philistines learned that the Israelites had gathered at that town, they decided to mount a sneak attack to catch the Israelites unprepared. So, as we read in our Old Testament Lesson, “when the people of Israel heard of it they were afraid of the Philistines” (v. 7). Think about this: only months before, the Israelites had fought the Philistines in a pitched battle—and lost, disastrously. But back then, at least the Israelites had been prepared, at least then they had readied themselves for war; this time, they seem unprepared, assembled for what’s basically an outdoor worship service in a small town. They’re outside the walls of Jerusalem—and they are absolutely not ready for war. Thousands had been killed the last time; but this time, it threatens to be an outright massacre. And the Israelites are terrified.

So the people called on Samuel: “Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us,” they said, “and pray that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines” (v. 8). Samuel made an offering and “Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel” (v. 9). Then, just as the Philistines closed in upon them, this happens: “but the LORD thundered with a mighty voice that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion” (v. 10). The thundering of God caused the attacking Philistines to flee; to everyone’s astonishment, God had saved the Israelites from death... And we read this: “Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer; for he said, ‘Thus far the LORD has helped us’” (v. 12).

In the Old Testament, we encounter a number of these “stones of witness”—pillars or rocks set up as memorials, as reminders, as witnesses to God’s grace and faithfulness. Think of Jacob, after dreaming of the angels and the ladder at Beer-sheba; we read, “he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it,” vowing, “this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house” (Genesis 28:18, 22). Or think of the Book of Joshua, when the Israelites crossed the Jordan; we read, “Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there to this day” (4:9). These stones were placed as records and witnesses, for the generations to come, of what God had done.

And in our Lesson this morning, we see Samuel do this, too: he laid up a stone as a witness to what God had done, “and [he] named it Ebenezer, for he said, ‘Thus far the LORD has helped us’” (v. 12). Now the connection between ‘Ebenezer’ and ‘God’s help’ isn’t clear in translation, but in the original language—in Hebrew—Ebenezer means, literally, “Stone of Help.” Samuel names this stone as an acknowledgment that the Israelites had reached this day, not by their own strength, but by the grace and help of God. He laid up Ebenezer, the Stone of Help, to declare that they had made it to this day because of God’s help alone.

The hymn, “Come thou Fount of every blessing,” is a classic of English hymnody. It was written in the late 1750s by Robert Robinson, who was only 22 at the time. And the second verse begins:  
“Here I raise my Ebenezer;  
hither by thy help I’m come;  
and I hope, by thy good pleasure,  
safely to arrive at home.”

This hymn imagines how we, like Samuel, may lay up our own Ebenezer; how we may recognize and record that we too have reached this day—not by our own strength or abilities, not by our own resourcefulness or planning, not by our own cleverness or maneuvering—but truly and solely by the grace of God.

You know, we can be very good at self-deception—especially when it comes to acknowledging the source of our successes. God blesses us and helps us in innumerable ways—yet, when we succeed, we can be very quick to credit ourselves; and thus we neglect the grace of God.

Yet Ebenezer, the Stone of Help—this is a reminder and a challenge to acknowledge the grace that has brought us to this day. We can either forget God’s grace—or we can mark it; we can neglect God’s grace—or we can commemorate it; we can dismiss God’s grace—or we can celebrate it. Were it not for Samuel laying up that Stone of Witness, perhaps the Israelites would have forgotten God’s help that day, remembering only their own success in that battle. And it’s the same for us: we can easily forget God’s grace and God’s help—or we can “raise [our] Ebenezer,” and remember and acknowledge that we have come to this day only by God’s help.

For any of you who don’t know, I’m a military chaplain and an Officer in Canadian Army Reserves. It’s been nearly 12 years since I completed Basic Training in Quebec. I was successful on Basic, though it was arduous and exhausting—as it’s supposed to be. But something that helped me get through Basic was the hymn

“Come thou Fount of every blessing”; I carried that hymn with me throughout those long weeks of training. One time, we were in the field, and we had a few moments of rest, and I’d taken a knee beside some ditch—and right beside me were a couple of stones. I was thinking of that hymn, and—when I came to the verse about Ebenezer—I lifted up one of those stones, and placed it atop the other. It’s very possible that, to this day, that rock is still standing in that ditch where I left it, my own stone of witness to God’s grace and God’s help.

“Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer; for he said, ‘Thus far the LORD has helped us.’” “Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by thy help I’m come.” Amen.