

"HITHERTO HATH THE LORD HELPED US"

"Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us." I Samuel 7:12.

There are times and seasons when we ought more particularly to take a retrospective view of God's dealings with us, both for the purpose of exciting our gratitude towards Him, and also of encouraging ourselves to trust in Him for the future. Such peculiar seasons are the return of a birthday, or the end or the beginning of a year. Thus, Samuel acted. From a sense of gratitude for special mercies to Israel he erected a memorial pillar, and inscribed thereon "Ebenezer," saying, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us". This rude stone was a simple and inexpensive device, but no monument ever reared by human hands was more pleasing to God. It would be well for us as Christians, at the end of this good year, in some way to imitate his splendid example.

The condition of the Hebrew commonwealth when Eli the priest died was very deplorable. The people were not only sadly ignorant, but had wandered far from virtue and God. Their country was often invaded by the armies of surrounding nations. Their most sacred treasure, the ark of the covenant, had been captured and carried away. They were oppressed, broken in spirit, given to idolatry, and immersed in vice. Such was their condition when Samuel became their priest and judge.

Commiserating their degraded and suffering condition, this good man called the people together, recounted their sins, and revealed to them the will of God. He told them that if they would sincerely repent and put away their strange gods, the Lord would deliver them out of the hands of the Philistines. They hearkened to his voice, forsook the worship of idols, and returned to the service of the true and living God. It was well that they should remember the defeat they had sustained, and that amidst the joyous victory they should recall that the battle would have been turned into a defeat unless the Lord had been upon their side. Let us remember our defeats!

That field between Mizpeh and Shen would also refresh their memories concerning their sins, for it was sin that conquered them. Had not their hearts been captured by sin, their land had never been captured by Philistia.

That spot would also remind them of their souls. What a mournful chapter in Israel's history is that which follows their defeat by the Philistines. Israel had twenty years of deep and bitter sorrow.

As this spot had been the place of their defeat, their sin, their sorrow, so it was also the place of their repentance. They came together to repent, to confess their sins, and to put away their false gods. It was there that they saw God's Hand and were led to say, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us." Mizpeh was also the place of renewed covenant, and its name signifies the watch-tower. These people came together to renew their covenant with God and wait for Him as upon a watch-tower. Whenever God's people look back upon the past, they should renew their covenant with God.

The Israelites had rejected the Lord, and He had consequently given them into the hands of the Philistines. But Samuel was prepared to win them back. He assured them that if they returned to God, He would rescue them. They did return. And the Lord proved equal to the occasion.

I. The Duty To Which We Are Summoned.

In the homes of polite society "thank you!" is one of the first things children are taught to say. It is one of the primary courtesies of life. We count it a badge of good breeding and refinement.

However, it is one thing to say "thank you" when polite usage demands it, and it is quite another to have a grateful heart. There is reason to suspect that a spirit of genuine thankfulness is all too rare. And we are the poorer for it. A thankful heart is a great asset. The habit of giving thanks richly rewards the one who cultivates it. Thankfulness enhances our joys and diminishes our sorrows.

We ought to give fervent thanks to God every day that we live. We owe it to Him from Whom we have received so much. We owe it to ourselves because a spirit of thankfulness is a tonic to the soul and a great defense against anxiety and depression. We owe it to those about us to cultivate a spirit of thankfulness, for we thus commend our faith and mark it with the seal of sincerity. By wearing the garment of praise, we encourage others to lift up their eyes from earth to heaven and put their faith in God.

We ought to erect memorials of devout gratitude for favors received from God. What are some of these favors?

1. Continuance of Life.

In the circle of our neighbors and friends, how many have slept the sleep of death during the past year, and yet we are the monuments of God's sparing mercy. They were taken, and we are still left.

2. Health and Strength.

While others are pining under affliction and sickness, health brightens our countenances, and we are still blessed with our usual strength.

3. Continued Reason.

How many who enjoyed this invaluable boon last year are now deprived of it; they now have a miserable existence, and life itself is a burden; but this is not your case. What cause for heartfelt gratitude!

4. Preservation From Many Dangers.

Others have suffered from accidents, but such is not your case. God had kept you from such evils. Be grateful for this care.

5. Supply of Your Temporal Needs.

While thousands have suffered from poverty and want, our mercies have been "new every morning"; we have been blessed with the necessities and comforts of life.

6. Support Under Trials.

Every year brings its trials; we have all had them, but have been brought through them, and, in some instances, in a way we did not expect.

Surely we should erect our "Ebenezer" and inscribe upon it, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us".

II. The Privilege That Is Ours.

1. To notice our mercies.
2. To acknowledge God in them.
3. To proclaim God's praise.

The review of the dealings of God with us is a pleasant task in which we should feel great delight. And it will do us good. What are some of the things which it will do for us?

1. It will help the memory.

By not calling these things to remembrance, we are apt to forget many things which have transpired; but by thus acting, we shall have many pleasant memories, and a more distinct remembrance of the way in which God has led us and of His goodness to us.

2. It will check any rising murmurings.

Under some trials we are prone to murmur and to repine; but the remembrance of our many mercies, and of our special deliverances would encourage us in God to believe that He who has so often delivered us will again interpose.

3. It will increase our gratitude.

4. It will strengthen our faith in God. Nothing is any more likely to strengthen our faith in God than the remembrance of God's faithfulness to us. He never disappoints those who trust in Him. This will establish our minds in His unchangeable love and encourage us to commit all our concerns to Him in the future.

5. It will make us better acquainted with God's ways.

As we study His dealings with us in providence and in grace, we shall better understand what He is doing for us and with us, and what He expects us to do for Him.

6. It will increase our happiness.

The more we think of these things, the more grateful we shall be, the more confidence we shall have in God, and, therefore, the more happy we shall be.

7. It will enable us to glorify God.

We cannot think of God's goodness, feel grateful towards Him, have more confidence in Him, and become more happy without glorifying Him. And the more we glorify Him, the more He will honor us. Review the past until you admire and adore, and at the end of this old year, erect a fresh "Ebenezer" to the praise and glory of your unchangeable and faithful God.

Note first that the victory is ascribed to God. The Lord has helped us. He is always our help. All the good deeds we do come from His strength, inspiration, and guidance. All power, talent, skill, and helpful conditions are His gifts.

What are the conditions necessary to our receiving divine help? To obtain His physical help, we must obey His physical laws. To obtain His spiritual help, we must obey His spiritual laws. It is needful for us to be in line with His will.

"Hitherto" means "throughout, all along." It includes the ordinary days as well as the special ones. We tend to see the Divine Hand only in the uncommon events of life, but He works through the common ones as well. He is as truly present in the usual as in the unusual. What a glorious fact it is that at the most humdrum moments God is with us!

"Hitherto" suggests that our work is not completed. So far, God's help has been forthcoming. What of the future? Samuel would have Israel take the past as a pledge of the future. The "hitherto" is a sure promise of the "hereafter", for ours is an unchanging God. Goodness and mercy have followed us; goodness and mercy will always follow us. The God of the past is the God of the present, and will be the God of the future. The God of the "hitherto" will be the God of the henceforth, even forever more. Will you take this God to be your Help during the coming New Year?