

ESF, Lord's day service message
5/1/2016

Ebenezer

1 Samuel 7:2-13

² *It was a long time, twenty years in all, that the ark remained at Kiriath Jearim, and all the people of Israel mourned and sought after the LORD.* ³ *And Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines."* ⁴ *So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only.*

⁵ *Then Samuel said, "Assemble all Israel at Mizpah and I will intercede with the LORD for you."* ⁶ *When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, "We have sinned against the LORD." And Samuel was leader of Israel at Mizpah.*

⁷ *When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled at Mizpah, the rulers of the Philistines came up to attack them. And when the Israelites heard of it, they were afraid because of the Philistines.* ⁸ *They said to Samuel, "Do not stop crying out to the LORD our God for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines."* ⁹ *Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. He cried out to the LORD on Israel's behalf, and the LORD answered him.*

¹⁰ *While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle. But that day the LORD thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites.* ¹¹ *The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth Car.*

¹² *Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far has the LORD helped us."* ¹³ *So the Philistines were subdued and did not invade Israelite territory again.*

Throughout Samuel's lifetime, the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines.

Ebenezer means “Thus far God has helped us.” To see the God of “Ebenezer” in our lives, there must be three actions. They are repenting, gathering and praying.

Repenting

The Israelites desperately sought God’s help to overcome their enemy the Philistines who were constantly harassing and oppressing them. At that time Samuel encouraged them to repent first of all. *“If you are returning to the LORD with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.”*

To receive God’s help in time of need, the first thing we have to do is returning to the Lord with all our hearts. In other words, repent. Repenting is not just confessing that we are sinners. It includes turning ourselves from sinful ways to committing ourselves to the Lord and serving Him only.

Repenting is not pleasant for us to do. Repenting starts with acknowledging that we are sinners. In religious circles these days, the word “repenting” is not a popular word. Some preachers are reluctant to use this word. Because it may offend many people. But it is the key to entering through the gate of God’s blessed kingdom. One of the essential points in Jesus’ preaching is “repentance.” At the outset of His public ministry, He preached, *“The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news”* (Mark 1:15).

When the people in Jerusalem asked Peter what they had to do to receive God’s gift, Peter told them to repent: *“Repent....every one of you, ... And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”* (Acts 2:38).

There are some people who wonder why God does not help them although they are praying hard and serving the Lord diligently. The reason may be that they are living with unrepentant sins. That was the situation of the people of Israel at the time of the prophet Isaiah. They thought that they were serving the Lord faithfully and wondered why the Lord did not answer to their prayers. Through the prophet Isaiah God told them the reason in Isaiah 1:15-16.

*When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even if you offer many prayers,
I will not listen.
Your hands are full of blood;*

*wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds
out of my sight!
Stop doing wrong,*

Then God also told them how they could receive the blessing of Ebenezer in the following verses (Isaiah 1:18-19):

*"Come now, let us reason together," ...
"Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson,
they shall be like wool.*

*If you are willing and obedient,
you will eat the best from the land;*

If you want to receive blessing from the God of Ebenezer, think about repentance first. Let's hear again what is repentance according to Samuel's word: *"rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the LORD and serve him only"* Is there anyone or anything that you may love more than you love God? Is there anything or anyone that is more important to you than God is? Is there anything or anyone that you fear more than you fear God? Rid yourself of it or that person. Put God at the center of your heart.

Gathering

To help the Israelites receive the blessing of the God of Ebenezer, Samuel encouraged them to gather at a place called “Mizpah.” When they gathered at Mizpah, they drew water and pour it out before the Lord. Pouring water before the Lord was a symbolic act that they were pouring their hearts out to the Lord. They gathered together to pour out their hearts to God (verses 5-6). They gathered together to worship the Lord with all their hearts.

In addition by gathering, they put their hearts together in the name of the Lord to fight against the oppressing enemy the Philistines.

Then God helped them defeat the enemy.

When we gather together to worship the Lord with all our hearts, God comes to us as the God of “Ebenezer.” The Lord Jesus promises, “*For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them*” (Matthew 18:20).

When the believers in Jerusalem gathered together they were constantly persecuted and threatened. But they did not stop gathering. They kept gathering in the name of the Lord: *Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.* (Acts 2:46-47a) And the Lord became Ebenezer through their gathering: *And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved* (Acts 47b).

The believers in the first century were tempted to avoid gathering when they were persecuted. But the author of Hebrews once again encouraged them to continue gathering: *Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching* (Hebrews 10:25).

Throughout 2000 years of Christian history, believers have been constantly persecuted by different kingdoms, religions, political and social systems while they have gathered to worship the Lord.

But true believers never stopped gathering in the name of the Lord. Because believers’ gathering is not an option but an ultimate command of the Lord

and it is the only way to meet the Lord of Ebenezer. The Believers' gathering is in itself a battle against the power of the devil who always tries to destroy their faith.

Until the Christian faith and worship gathering was legalized by the Roman emperor Constantine in AD 313, the believers in Rome had been persecuted severely by many emperors. When they were arrested for their faith practices-including worship gathering they were displayed publicly in humiliation, tortured, or even burnt alive. But they had not stopped gathering. They had continued gathering even in the tombs known as catacombs. And so God had been with them as the Lord of Ebenezer.

Today, many believers like the believers of the China house churches still continue gathering in the midst of persecution. God still reveals Himself as the Lord of Ebenezer through them.

When our lives are getting busier and busier, it is not easy for us to gather together. The devil who wants to keep us from the blessings of Ebenezer tempts us not to gather. The devil knows that if believers gather together in worship, the God of Ebenezer will be with them, and he cannot defeat them. So the devil will do everything he can to prevent us from gathering. The devil uses many different tools to entice us into doing something else or just staying away from believers' gatherings.

So, we must follow the principle of Ebenezer in the Bible. We must remember those believers who risked their lives to gather even in the midst of persecution and so received the power and glory of the Lord of Ebenezer.

We must gather together in spite of all the difficulties and sacrifices.

Praying

When the Israelites received the blessing of "Ebenezer" they prayed. While they gathered at Mizpah, the Philistines suddenly attacked them. The Philistine army were far stronger than they were. They had no weapons to defeat the Philistines. They were afraid of the enemy.

At that time, they asked Samuel to pray to God for them: *“Do not stop crying out for us. Don’t stop praying for us. God may rescue us from the enemy.”* Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. He cried out to the LORD on Israel’s behalf and the Lord answered him. The Lord sent out a thunder to terrify and defeat the enemy. And Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, “Thus far has the LORD helped us.”

The God of Ebenezer works through praying people. D.L. Moody said, “Every revival can be traced to a kneeling figure.”

When the European settlers came to this land of America, nothing was easy for them to handle. They had to start everything out of nothing. Native Indians were hostile against them. Sometimes they had to fight the Indians with little weapons and ammunition and had no way to overcome the native Indians’ power. At such a time, they had only one weapon- it was prayer. When they did not have weapons or ammunition they fought with prayer. And the Lord of Ebenezer delivered them from all dangers.

When we pray for others and for each other God especially blesses us as the God of Ebenezer. Little more than a year ago, we heard that the brother of a sister in our church was put in jail. He was the mayor of a city in Peru. He was accused of a political crime of which we did not know the details. We were unable to do anything to vindicate or release him. But we knew there was one thing we could do. It was prayer for him. We have been praying for him. We have prayed that the Lord may give him favor. While we prayed for him days turned to weeks, and weeks turned to months without any sign of God’s favor. Then a few days ago, we got news that a Peruvian court pronounced his innocence and he will be released soon. We also received other blessed news- he became a Christian while he was in the prison and is determined to serve the Lord with all his heart.

Today, there are many things in this world that may frighten us, but there is God who is our Ebenezer. No matter what happens to us, when we pray, God always helps us.