

La R 197 Sermon preached by Mr. J. Raven at Shaw's Corner, Redhill
on Sunday evening, December 29th 1946

"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 when it is particularly seasonable and right to have remembrance of the Lord's dealings in the past. Just as when you are on a journey you may on your way reach the summit of a hill, and you may look back over the road you have traversed and take a view of the type of country through which you have come, so it is spiritually. The child of God may at times reach a point in his experience, in his life's journey, when there is a special call, so to speak, to look back and to remember all the way that the Lord their God has led them these many years in the wilderness. There are times when there is a special call to reflect upon the particular dealings of God with His people, and so here, Israel had been through a very sad and solemn experience.

The whole history of Israel is a sad history of continual departings from God, evidence of the truth of what the Lord Himself said of them at the outset, that they were a stiff-necked people that would not walk steadfastly in His ways. Again and again they turned aside to idolatry and folly and then the rod of God was laid upon them. They were beaten with heavy stripes, and in their trouble, we read in Psalm 107, they cried unto the Lord and He heard them and delivered them. O many times did He deliver them, and yet again and again they departed from Him. "They soon forgot His works", they soon forgot their indebtedness to the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob; and so things went on as recorded in the book of the Judges and in the early part of the first book of Samuel, and in the portion that we read this evening (chapters 6 and 7) the people had been again under the rod of God laid upon them by means of the Philistines. They had been sorely pressed, and you remember how the Ark of God had been in the hands of the Philistines for a season. We have been reading a little of what happened to the Philistines on account of this. In the fifth chapter we read how that the Ark was taken into the house of Dagon their God, and what happened to Dagon. They found it a very serious matter to have taken the Ark of the Lord, but for a length of time the Ark was out of the coasts of Israel, and Israel lamented after the Lord. They had to experience the bitterness of the hiding of God's face. What a serious thing it is for the Lord to hide His face from His people for their transgressions! Yet we find here in this chapter how the Lord had raised up Samuel, and Samuel was still a young man. When we read of him last in this book he was but a boy; the Lord had spoken to

him and spoken by him, and now he was a very young man, but he was established as the Lord's prophet among the people. The Lord made him a ruler and a judge of His people Israel, and we read how he judged Israel and how under his hand Israel was brought back to the worship of the God of their fathers, and the Lord heard their confessions and their prayers. Under the instruction of Samuel they humbled themselves before the Lord and confessed their sins, and the Lord hearkened to them and delivered them from their enemies, and then it was that "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." Ebenezer, as you know, means the Stone of Help.

"Hitherto hath the Lord helped us". Now you consider this testimony in the light of what I have just hinted at, the ill manners of this people from the day of their coming out of the land of Egypt, how often they had provoked the Lord, how they forgot their God and forgot His works; they were ungrateful and they forsook the fountain of living waters and hewed out to themselves broken cisterns that could hold no water. They were continually going after the false gods of the heathen round about, and yet Samuel was able to bear this testimony, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us". Is it not a wonderful thing, a wonderful display of divine mercy and grace and longsuffering, that He should so constantly help such a people, that He should be so merciful, so longsuffering, that He should turn again and again to them when they cried unto Him in their distresses, and that He should help them? They were not a number of good people, they were not an obedient nation that He so continually helped. Now, all this is full of instruction for us and of encouragement too for us in these days. There are some of us, at any rate, who see in the history of the children of Israel a counterpart of the history of our own lives, our own behaviour, at least it is so with me. The innumerable instances of departures from God, heart sins, lip sins, life sins, words spoken amiss, things done amiss, forgetting God, becoming formal and indifferent in prayer, becoming indifferent in reading the Word, satisfied often with the bare reading of the Word as a matter of religious duty, ceasing at times to make conscience of words and of thoughts and of motives. There is all this, and we do in this way provoke the Lord, provoke Him to depart from us. You know, I have thought sometimes and trembled at what we read of Samson - it has often come to my mind. When Delilah had shorn off Samson's locks he went out as he had at other times when she said, "the Philistines are upon thee", but he "wist not that the spirit of the Lord had departed from him"; "he wist not that the spirit of the Lord had departed from him", that does speak

very solemnly in one's heart sometimes, and when one considers the untowardness of one's own heart, the ungrateful carriage before the Lord, one can see abundant reason why that judgment should fall upon him, and the spirit of the Lord depart. David's cry has to be at times the cry of one's own heart, "Cast me not away from thy presence and take not thy Holy Spirit from me". It is a fearful thing to contemplate to be an outcast. The apostle Paul contemplated it and trembled, for he tells us of his experience, how he had to keep under his body, "and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway". Yes, he felt the terrible solemnity of this being cast away from God's presence, and it is not a bad thing to feel these things, it is not a bad thing to be so exercised about them as to have to go before God with supplications and with a burdened and broken heart on account of sin and felt unworthiness of the least of God's mercies, to have to go before Him and plead with Him, "Forsake me not, forsake me not", while for the encouragement of the people of God it is written that through all the vicissitudes in which their own guiltiness played so large a part, the Lord did not forsake His people.

I once had my attention called to a passage at the end of Jeremiah's prophecy, where it is said, "Israel hath not been forsaken, nor Judah of his God though their land was filled with sin against the Holy One of Israel". If we think of these things rightly, (and we only think of them rightly if we think of them with a tender conscience and with a self-loathing heart) it does not make us regard sin as a light thing, but rather we see it to be a hateful thing and our prayer will be

"May I from every sin
As from a serpent fly,
Abhor to touch the thing unclean,
And rather choose to die".

O, you who have known what sin does in separating between your soul and God, in bringing a cloud between you and God, a cloud which you feel when you try to pray, a cloud which you feel if you attempt to read the Word, a cloud which you feel when in the public assembly, a cloud between your soul and God, will know it to be a bitter thing to you. O what a mercy it is that the Lord should bear with the ill-manners of such as we, the ill-manners of which some of us are so painfully conscious! O that the Lord should bear with them and that we should be in the position this evening, as we near the close of another year of time, to say, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us". Unworthy that we are, though we have deserved times without number to be forsaken of Him, and to have his heavy judgments poured out upon us, yet "Hitherto

hath the Lord helped us", and it is good when we are enabled to look back upon particular times and see how and where the Lord helped us. O it is well for us to pray that we may not be forgetful as to our past experience.

You know, one of the things said against Israel was that "they soon forgot His works", and I believe that a child of God may get into such a carnal, worldly state of mind as scarcely to think of what the Lord has done in the past. Instead of there being a meditating upon the "years of the right hand of the Most High", there is a forgetfulness of what the Lord has done, as if He had done nothing at all, whereas if we are preserved in health of soul, with tenderness of heart and conscience, O how precious to us from time to time will be the thought of the "years of the right hand of the Most High", the things that the Lord has done for us, the words He has spoken to us, upon which He has caused us to hope, the little helps afforded, the encouragements that He has given, the revivings of our soul from time to time, deliverances out of temptation and out of trouble, help in trouble, help under burdens. It is well to be enabled to reflect upon these things, and it is good for believers to be speaking often of these things one to another. As I think I reminded you recently, the pilgrims in Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress kept one another waking by some godly discourse upon the way in which the Lord had led them in their pilgrimage, where the Lord began with them, how He led them, and the deliverances He wrought. All this afforded matter for profitable and heart-refreshing discourses, and I believe it is now among the people of God wonderfully refreshing when they are helped to speak thus of the things of God, when one and another will speak of what the Lord has done in the past, where the Lord began with the soul. But can you make such a beginning? Can you follow the example of Bunyan's Pilgrims and begin where God began with you? Has He begun with you yet? Have you ever asked Him to begin with you? Is it it ever a concern of your heart that He would begin with you? that He would not leave your soul destitute of the gracious teaching of His Holy Spirit? so that you have said to the Lord,

"If I have never yet begun
To tread the sacred road,
O teach my wandering feet the way
To Zion's blest abode.

Or if I falter in the path,
Assist me with Thy strength,
And lead me safely on till I
Shall reach thy Heaven at length".

When a child of God looks back sometimes as enabled by the Spirit

and he remembers the "years of the right hand of the Most High", what a wonderful spectacle it is, how it fills his mind with astonishment that he should have been so base and that the Lord should have been so kind. We sometimes sing, "Though we are guilty, Thou art good". We may well say, "Lord, is this thy kindness to one so unworthy, to one so vile?" as we view ourselves and our sinfulness and our folly and our ingratitude and our forgetfulness of the God who gave us breath. And then think that He has not forgotten you, that He has not forsaken you, that He has not "let you quite leave Him" as the hymn writer puts it, but He has put a hedge here about your path, or a check on you there. You would have gone this way to your soul's hurt, and but for grace, to your destruction, had not the Lord put a hedge there and withdrawn you from your purpose, would not let you go the way that you set your heart upon, and as you reflect upon His kindness, His faithfulness and mercy in thus dealing with you, it will fill your heart with astonishment that He should be so kind to one so unworthy and so perverse as you see yourself to have been. Then with what humility, with what shame and blushing face will you raise your own personal Ebenezer, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us". There will be this confession, "If the Lord had not helped me it would have been impossible for me to continue as at this day". "Had it not been that the Lord was on our side, then our enemies had swallowed us up quick", said the Psalmist. If the Lord had not been with me I should have fallen into and been destroyed by such and such a snare; had not the Lord helped me and upheld me when Satan roared against me I should have been swept away, I could not have stood against his temptations, against his subtlety, and his rage would have been too much for me, but "Hitherto hath the Lord helped me". The poet says.

"Thy mercy first prevailed
From death to set me free,
And often since my life had failed
Had it not been in Thee".

What a mercy it is that the Lord has not left the life of His people in their own keeping, but in His own keeping; "Your life is hid with Christ in God", where the enemy cannot touch it to destroy it. He may try God's people, he may wound them and distress them, but he cannot destroy them, for their life is hidden. He was permitted to proceed against Job, and he hurt him very much in his family, etc.; O how sad and sudden were Job's bereavements and his losses! What a sore affliction was laid upon his poor body! but God said, "Touch not his life"; and so whatever the Lord suffers the tempter to do against His people He allows him to do no more than shall be over-ruled for their good. "That foe can't boast of much that makes us watch and pray".

The devil had not gained anything when by his temptations and his rage he has driven a poor, frightened sheep closer to the side of the Good Shepherd.

"Whate'er my wisdom does,
Or lets the tempter do,
Thy guilt and ruin to disclose,
One thing I keep in view-
To teach thee how to live
By faith in Jesus' name;
For guilt and sin to mourn and grieve,
And sing the Lamb once slain".

"Hitherto hath the Lord helped us". You look at the providential path and see how years ago some of us looked forward with many fears to the future. Things looked very dark and we had some very gloomy pictures in our imagination.

"How prone the mind to search for ill,
To fancy mighty woes!"

but now in looking back over the years what have we to say? We have to say that we have not lacked, that "The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble and He knoweth them that trust in Him". I remember when this last devastating war broke upon the world what fears we had, and they appeared to be well-grounded fears too, as to what would be our fate, and nothing but the mercy of God turned it aside from us, but see how we have been brought through. In our minds we saw ourselves stripped of everything, all our property, all our savings, everything gone, just as it has happened to people in some other countries in Europe, yet see how good God has been to us. "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us". We were not over-run and now we have come to days of comparative peace. We see trouble abroad, distress among the nations, confusion and unrest, and in our own land there is a spirit abroad of discontent among men, there is a lack of consideration one for another; one part of the community cares not for the other or how their actions may affect other sections of the community, but will quite light-heartedly inflict hardship upon multitudes of their fellow countrymen. In the midst of all this what have we to say? "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us". He has not suffered us to feel the weight of these things and the pinch of them as we might have felt it. It really may well fill the mind with astonishment to consider what the Lord has done providentially, that things are as well as they are with us.

"His goodness runs an endless round,
All glory to the Lord"

It is good, and it is very sweet to be enabled with a feeling heart to acknowledge His goodness. I cannot tell you how sweet it is to have a spirit of gratitude to God springing up in one's heart. I well

remember one occasion when a very, very simple little incident one morning brought to my mind the goodness of God. It is true that my wife was very ill in bed upstairs and I was sitting alone at the breakfast table, but all at once I had such a view of the goodness of God to me that instead of asking a blessing silently as I usually did in those circumstances, I had to sing "For mercies countless as the sands", and I could hardly command my voice to sing it; and you know, the sweetness of that breakfast time has left an impression upon my mind to this day. There is still the memory of the inexpressible sweetness of being enabled out of a full heart to pour out thanksgiving to God.

"When all thy mercies, O my God,
My rising soul surveys,
Transported with the view I'm lost,
In wonder, love and praise."

I remember how that verse sang in my heart again and again all through the day.

"Hitherto hath the Lord helped us". O He is to be adored, and adored for His providential goodness. Surely it is utterly wrong for us to receive such abundant goodness from His hand and receive it as the beast receives his fodder. There is no thanksgiving to God in the beast and often we are just like beasts for very ingratitude, but may the Lord help us to reflect upon these things and to consider His dealings with us.

And then go back as I said just now, to the time, the place and the manner in which the Lord began with you, if so be He has begun with you, when He first made you to feel your sinnership, confronted you with the reality of your guilt, when He shewed you a heart the sight of which filled you with horror and made you feel lost, lost, lost, What then? Why you may say this, some of you, "I believe that under all that the Lord did place His everlasting arms beneath me. His grace taught me to pray, and drew me to His mercy-seat and enabled me to pour out my heart in confession and supplication before Him, and that often when I felt so unable and seemed to have no breath to pray, yet again and again His spirit helped my infirmities". Often a believer prays best when he is distressed because he cannot pray. The Lord helped a poor sinner to look up, helped a poor soul to pour out the publican's prayer before the Lord.

And then, can you go back to the time when you got a word from God? The Psalmist said, "Remember the word unto thy servant upon which thou hast caused me to hope". O, a word from God is a good thing, it is a

precious thing to get a word from God, a word that causes hope to spring up in your heart, hope in His mercy, hope in Him through Jesus Christ the Redeemer. Or it may be that you get a word to encourage you in the way, "then shall we know if we follow on to know the Lord", and that puts strength in you, gives you some encouragement to press on in seeking to know Him, to press on through all the clouds of unbelief that surround your soul, through all the temptations and difficulties that beset you, to press on to follow on to know the Lord, and though faint, yet to be pursuing, for "He giveth power to the faint and to them that have no might He increaseth strength".

I think the first word I ever had for my encouragement was this, "The vision is yet for an appointed time, though it tarry wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry". O it is good to reflect upon these things and upon the effect they had upon our heart. It is good to go back to them again and again, and turn them into pleas at the mercy-seat, as Jacob went back to Bethel and said to the Lord, "Lord, thou hast said", "Thou hast said", and he had to plead with God the good words that he spoke to him at Bethel, and the Lord takes it well when poor people remind Him of the good words He has spoken to them, perhaps years before. If the Lord gives you a word it is to be made use of, it is not to be put by on the shelf for the dust to collect upon it; but the Lord will see to it that you have occasion to use it. If you get a word from Him He will see to it that you are brought into places where that word is more than ever necessary to you. And what can you say of the word whereupon the Lord has caused you to hope? Why, could you not say this, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped me?" "O, He has helped me to look to that promise and to look to Himself in it. The Lord has helped me to plead it with Him, given me power to lay it before Him, and to see from Him the fulfilment of it in my experience."

"Hitherto hath the Lord helped me". And what of those seasons of backsliding when you wandered far from Him, when you forgot Him, when you became careless, when your prayers became formal, when you had so little appetite for the word, and your heart was cold to the means of grace, and the ministry became a weariness to you? What then? Well, if a child of God gets into such a state, and there are many that do, alas, you may be sure the Lord will "visit their transgressions with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes". With rebukings He will correct them for their iniquity; sooner or later He will make up His accounts with them and they will find it heavy work. they will find it an evil and bitter thing that they have done in departing thus from the

Lord, in provoking Him so grievously and so flagrantly; they will find their indulgence of the flesh to be an evil thing. But then, when they are brought down with hard labour under their guilt, when they realise what a desperate plight they are reduced to by their folly, then they cry unto the Lord, and O the broken hearted cries. "O God, forsake me not, be merciful to me a sinner". One of our hymns says,

"Save me from gloomy, black despair".

They cry unto the Lord in their trouble and He saveth them from their distresses, and again they have to raise an Ebenezer and say, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped me". I remember after having been in a very dreadful state for some months, and that through my sin and my folly, I was consciously under the hidings of God's face, I was walking one day in a spot on a friend's farm in Berkshire, when the Lord began to smile again upon me, and it was with these words, "Sweet majesty and awful love sit smiling on His brow". The Lord turned and looked upon me and I remember saying, "Lord, how is it that thou will manifest thyself unto me and not unto the world?" O it is wonderful, when having experienced the richly deserved hidings of His face, the Lord turns and looks and smiles again. It is wonderful, it is astonishing! and the Lord says His people shall not open their mouths any more because of their sins when He is pacified towards them for all that they have done, and His forgiving love, His restoring mercy is wonderfully heartening, sweetly humbling. The Lord grant that we may know it, the Lord grant that it may be our mercy to raise our Ebenezers again and again in view of the Lord's providential and gracious dealings with us, and say, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us".

Amen.