

## **Ebenezer**

The Rev. Dr. Donald K. McKim '74

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1 Samuel 7:2-12

In its wisdom, the Presbyterian Church (USA) and its predecessor denominations have historically required the study of biblical Hebrew as a prerequisite for ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacraments. So it “was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be” (maybe!). Fortunately, in this place, Presbyterians and students from other denominations can take biblical Hebrew from competent, caring—and non-intimidating professors . Thank God!

But even if you don't take the Hebrew course, some Hebrew words get known to us. We know names, such as 'Joshua'—"God saves" or "David"—"beloved" or "Hanna"—"Grace." Culturally, we all know the term "shalom"—"peace." Though I have to say that "shalom" can also be "adjusted" for particular cultures. When we moved to Memphis, Tennessee from Philadelphia, I remember seeing a sign on the door of Memphis Presbytery when I visited. It said, "Shalom, ya'll"! So that was a combination of two languages: Hebrew and "Southern"!

If you pay attention to hymns in church, there is one Hebrew term you will remember singing. It's in the second stanza of what will be our closing hymn, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing." The stanza reads:

“Here I raise my Ebenezer,  
Hither by Thy help I'm come;  
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure,  
Safely to arrive at home.”

“Ebenezer.” That's a Hebrew term. But what's an “Ebenezer”? Hear the word and your first thought is of Charles Dickens', *The Christmas Carol* and the most famous “Ebenezer” in all of literature: Ebenezer Scrooge. “Ebenezer” was a name that parents gave children, favored particularly by some of the Puritans (though you don't hear of too many baby “Ebenezers” anymore!). If you are really up on your church history (in the Reformed orbit), you may think of Ebenezer Erskine (1680-1754) who was a leader of a “secession” from the Church of Scotland from 1733-1740. Search Google and you will find listings for an Ebenezer Baptist Church, an Ebenezer AME Church, an Ebenezer Lutheran Church; and “Ebenezer's Pub and Restaurant”—in Lovell, Maine. This establishment claims to have been rated “the number one beer bar in America and the world” for three years by *Beer Advocate Magazine* and to feature “35 Belgian beers on tap and over 700 well kept bottles.” According to its website, “the restaurant takes its name from George Ebenazar Kezar, a trapper from Canterbury, New Hampshire, who came to the area in 1766. Local lore has it that Ebenezer got in a wrestling match with a black bear. And this bear had attitude—unfortunately not as much as Ebenezer. Legend has it that Ebenezer killed the bear, but he lost one of his arms in the process. (He did, however, come away with one heck of a nice looking bear pelt.)” The description continues: “And if that wasn't cause for a beer, we don't know what is.”<sup>1</sup>

But we probably have a sense that our hymn and the Hebrew term “Ebenezer” refer to something different—and something more—than Ebenezer Scrooge or Ebenezer's Pub and Restaurant. You

heard it in the Scripture read this morning. 1 Samuel 7:12 memorably says: “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.’”

The prophet Samuel took a stone, set it up and named it Ebenezer. Samuel set up a memorial stone. “Ebenezer” literally means “stone of help.” It was a stone set to commemorate the help the people of Israel perceived had been given them by God in defeating the Philistines when they got back the Ark of the Covenant which the Philistines had confiscated from Israel in earlier battles. The “stone of help,” the “Ebenezer,” marked the memory of God’s power, God’s presence, God’s blessing, God’s help. The Scots Bible translator, James Moffatt, translates it literally: “Samuel took a stone...naming it Helpstone” (1 Sam. 7:12). “Here I raise my Ebenezer.”

God is the God of help. This is the refrain that breathes through the Bible. How often do we see people crying out to God—for help? And how often do we see the testimony of faith that cries out: “Ebenezer!”—“the Lord has helped us”! This was the experience of Samuel’s own mother, Hannah. Maybe you remember the story from Sunday School. Hannah could not conceive a child. So she prayed to the Lord, being “deeply distressed “ and weeping bitterly” (1 Sam. 1:10). God “remembered her,” (1 Sam. 1:19), as the Scripture puts it; and “in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, ‘I have asked him of the Lord’” (1 Sam. 1:20). The Lord helped her! The very prophet who set up the Ebenezer stone was himself a “living stone,” a visible reminder to his own mother that God answers prayer, that God helps. Ebenezer!

God is our help is the core piety of the Psalms. Over and over again, we hear it: “The Lord helps them and rescues them” (Ps. 37:40); “God is in the midst of the city, it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns” (Ps. 46:5). It rings in Psalm 46 made immortal in dear Luther’s hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is our God.” In Psalm 86, the psalmist cries, “You, Lord, have helped me and comforted me” (Ps. 86:17). It comforts us in the much beloved 121<sup>st</sup> Psalm: “I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Ps. 121:1-2). It is no wonder John Calvin liked to begin the worship of God in Geneva with the related verse from Psalm 124: “Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Ps. 124:8). “Ebenezer”: “Thus far the Lord has helped us.”

God helps us and then gives us ways of remembering this help. This is how God works. It is God’s style. Calvin’s spoke of God’s accommodation, God’s “condescending” or “adjusting” God’s own self to our human capacities, as a mother talks to a child. We need this, don’t we? Calvin said that since “our faith is slight and feeble unless it be propped on all sides and sustained by every means, it trembles, wavers, totters, and at last gives way. Here our merciful Lord, according to his infinite kindness, so tempers himself to our capacity that, since we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh, and, do not think about or even conceive of anything spiritual, he condescends to lead us to himself even by these earthly elements, and to set before us in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessing. For if we were incorporeal (as Chrysostom says), he would give us these very things naked and incorporeal. Now, because we have souls engrafted in bodies, he imparts spiritual things under visible ones.”<sup>2</sup> Calvin says all this in his section on “Word and sign” as he deals with the sacraments. God confirms God’s truth, God helps us in our lives—and then goes on to give us visible, physical

reminders and confirmations and “visual aids” if you will, to confirm God’s word and promise and actions in our hearts and lives. God knows we need these helps. And God gives them. For God is the God of help. Ebenezer!

A question for us this morning is simply: Who and where are the “Ebenezers” in our lives? They are surely there, if only we recognize them. As people of faith, as the people of God grounded in the church, we know God has helped us. We sang it in our opening hymn, as the text of Isaac Watts based on Psalm 90: “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past, our hope for years to come.” God has helped us in the past, God helps us in the present, and God will help us in the future. But who and where are the “Ebenezers” in your life which give you that hope and confidence for the days ahead; and which nurture your faith day by day now, as you live in the continuing providence of God which has brought you “safe thus far” from your earliest days? Do we know and recognize our Ebenezers?

Of course there are the “Ebenezers” that are common to all of us in the church. When I was confirmed in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1961 (!), one of the three questions posed in the *Book of Common Worship* for those being confirmed asked: “Do you promise to make diligent use of the means of grace?” Some of these “means of grace” are clear to us: the Scriptures, Bible reading, prayer, worship, sacraments. These are common to all of us as Christians. We use these “means of grace” as a natural part of our Christian lives in the church. But should we not also add another “means of grace” to the list? How about our “Ebenezers”? Are they not also ways God uses to point us toward God’s help in our lives, the visible reminders of God’s presence and power and blessings? Do we know and recognize our Ebenezers?

This is a question that is perhaps answered best in the silence of our own hearts. God deals with us as the unique persons we are. Each of us has our own journey, our own story. Each of us has experienced the help of God in unique and personal ways. While we all swim in the same bloodstream as part of the church, we as “one body” have “many members” and the narrative of God’s dealings with us in our own lives is the story that is known best and most particularly by each of us.

But I would like to call attention in a very specific way to “Ebenezers” that surround us this morning. I refer especially to Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and this theological community itself. We all have various connections and relationships and memories of this place. Some of you as students will be here for two or three years and then be gone. Others may take longer—maybe you’re on the “Forty Year Plan” for theological education—like the children of Israel! Others as staff and faculty and alums or Board of Directors members have had much longer associations here. I came here as a student in 1971, thirty-eight years ago, and had been on campus a number of times before then. I was married in this chapel. My eyes and ears and prayers have been turned to this place for over four decades. And I have been blessed by this encounter of long-standing.

So I would ask that as you “count your Ebenezers”—just as you “count your many blessings,” name Pittsburgh Theological Seminary as one of them. When you see the sign on Highland Avenue: “Pittsburgh Theological Seminary Founded 1794,” or walk into the Barbour library, or

stroll past the Long Administration building, or elbow your way in front of someone in the cafeteria line—look around, and realize: God is in this place! God’s power and presence is alive here! God blesses people in this little patch of East Liberty on the ground that once was part of the acreage of a private home. Now there are stones and bricks and mortar erected here. Buildings have been named for some of the important people in the life of this institution. Now for more than fifty years this “stone” has been set up—and it is named “Ebenezer”: the Lord has helped us.

But Pittsburgh Theological Seminary is more than only these stones and bricks and buildings. This is a living theological community. It is alive with people! Just published is my book, *Ever a Vision: A Brief History of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1959-2009*.<sup>3</sup> In it, I tried to tell the story of this institution in this period. But the book is really, of course, about the people who have lived and worked and studied and served here for half a century. People are a means of grace, the “Ebenezers” God gives us in our lives to enable us and nourish us on our journeys of faith. I have known many people through my association with Pittsburgh Seminary—as you will have as well. But see them and remember them as “Ebenezers”—the visible reminders of God’s gracious help to us as would-be disciples of Jesus Christ and servants of our living Lord. Through all its fifty years, students and staff and faculty of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary have encountered in one another, women and men committed to learning the Gospel, teaching the Gospel, communicating the Gospel, and living the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When you look around you this morning in this Hicks Memorial Chapel, you will see them. They are right next to you. They are what the writer of the First Letter of Peter called “living stones,” (1 Pet. 2:4), all pointing us toward the “cornerstone chosen and precious,” even Jesus Christ himself. (1 Pet. 2:6).

We recognize our “Ebenezers.” And we become “Ebenezers” for others. God uses the likes of us, “rag-tag bunch” that we are, to communicate the precious gospel of Christ, as well. My beloved teacher of theology in this place was Dr. Arthur Cochrane, whom I consider a “pure theologian”—all things were theological for him. He was one of the world’s leading scholars of Karl Barth and like Barth himself, saw theology as “the joyful science.” Dr. Cochrane started on the faculty here the same year I became a student, in 1971. He stirred our interest in the great Swiss theologian (and our younger son is named “Karl”—with a “K”). During my second year, some of us drove to Toronto, Canada to attend the initial meeting of the Karl Barth Society of North America (they were going to call it the “North American Karl Barth Society” until someone asked: “What exactly is a “North American” Karl Barth?!). One of the theologians I met there—with whom I still keep in contact—was Martin Rumscheidt. Rumscheidt was the last Canadian to study under Karl Barth. When Barth returned from his trip to America, in the winter term of 1961-62, he held a reception for his students. As Rumscheidt recounted at the memorial service for Barth in 1968: “I was to leave for home a week later, and felt sad at having to say what I thought was my final farewell.... I managed to thank him for the immense enrichment, the encouragement and the joy, he had give me. He stood facing me in his black corduroy jacket, his glasses on the tip of his nose and his hair happily tousled. He put both hands on my shoulders, gave them a squeeze and said: ‘Freely you have received, freely give.’”<sup>4</sup> This is what we do here. This is “ever our vision” at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary! When you look around at this place; when you look around at the people in this place, hear those words applied to us: “Freely

we have received, so we freely give.” We recognize our “Ebenezers.” And we become “Ebenezers” for others.

“Then Samuel took a stone and set it up...and named it Ebenezer; for he said, “Thus far the Lord has helped us.””

Let us pray.

O God our help, for the blessings of your power and presence we thank you. For all the means of grace we give you praise. For Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, for the people who are part of this community today, and for all those who have been part of this body for the past fifty years in the communion of saints—we thank you and praise you. We commit ourselves to serve you in Jesus Christ, our true help and our salvation. In his name we pray, Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ebenezerspub.net/AboutUs.html>.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.14.3.

<sup>3</sup> Donald K. McKim, *Ever a Vision: A Brief History of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009).

<sup>4</sup> H. Martin Rumscheidt at Barth Memorial Service, University of Toronto, December 19, 1968. From Karl Barth, *Fragments Grave and Gay*, trans. Eric Mosbacher (London: Fontana, 1971), 127.