

16TH AUGUST 2020

FERINTOSH PARISH CHURCH

WORSHIP AT HOME



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"The doctrine of the atonement is to my mind one of the surest proofs of the divine inspiration of Holy Scripture. Who would or could have thought of the just Ruler dying for the unjust rebel? This is no teaching of human mythology, or dream of poetical imagination. This method of expiation is only known among us because it is a fact; fiction could not have devised it. God himself ordained it; it is not a matter which could have been imagined." (C. H. Spurgeon)

PSALM 121

I to the hills will lift mine eyes.
From whence doth come mine aid?
My safety cometh from the Lord,
who heaven and earth hath made.

Thy foot he'll not let slide, nor will
he slumber that thee keeps.
Behold, he that keeps Israel,
he slumbers not, nor sleeps.

The Lord thee keeps, the Lord thy shade
on thy right hand doth stay:
the moon by night thee shall not smite,
nor yet the sun by day.

The Lord shall keep thy soul: he shall
preserve thee from all ill.
Henceforth thy going out and in
God keep for ever will.

PRAYER

Precious God and heavenly Father, we come with joy into your presence. We thank you for the Lord's day that you have given to us and for the assurance that you have granted to us already that Jesus Christ has risen from the grave and conquered death and sin, and we pray as we come afresh this morning to the study of your word, that our Lord Jesus Christ Himself by His Holy Spirit through His word will be our teacher and our God. We pray that the book will live for us and we pray that by the power of your truth you will more and more conform us to Christ, it's Author, We pray that the Holy Spirit will be our Master and that our Lord Jesus Himself will be our Teacher. And this we pray for His great name's sake. Amen.



LORD'S PRAYER

*Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE READING 1 SAMUEL 7: 3 - 17 (NKJV)

3 Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, "If you return to the Lord with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from among you, and prepare your hearts for the Lord, and serve Him only; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines."

4 So the children of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and served the Lord only.

5 And Samuel said, "Gather all Israel to Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you."

6 So they gathered together at Mizpah, drew water, and poured it out before the Lord. And they fasted that day, and said there, "We have sinned against the Lord." And Samuel judged the children of Israel at Mizpah.

7 Now when the Philistines heard that the children of Israel had gathered together at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the children of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines.

8 So the children of Israel said to Samuel, "Do not cease to cry out to the Lord our God for us, that He may save us from the hand of the Philistines."

9 And Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. Then Samuel cried out to the Lord for Israel, and the Lord answered him.

10 Now as Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel. But the Lord thundered with a loud thunder upon the Philistines that day, and so confused them that they were overcome before Israel.

11 And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and [c]drove them back as far as below Beth Car.

12 Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen, and called its name Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the Lord has helped us."

13 So the Philistines were subdued, and they did not come anymore into the territory of Israel. And the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel.

14 Then the cities which the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath; and Israel recovered its territory from the hands of the Philistines. Also there was peace between Israel and the Amorites.

15 And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life.

16 He went from year to year on a circuit to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah, and judged Israel in all those places.

17 But he always returned to Ramah, for his home was there. There he judged Israel, and there he built an altar to the Lord.

SERMON

Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer; for he said, "Till now the Lord has helped us" (1 Sam. 7:12).

Twenty years have passed since the Ark of the Covenant was lost to Israel. Their leaders sought to use God's holy Ark as a military superweapon, without first humbling themselves before the Lord or seeking His will. God gave Israel over to defeat and His Ark fell into Philistine hands. Seven months later, God had inflicted such wrath on the Philistines that they sent the Ark back to Israel, where it remained in an obscure border village. For twenty years, the Philistines maintained their domination over God's people.


Israel were forbidden by the Philistines to employ blacksmiths, for fear that Israelite ploughshares would be beaten into swords and their enemies maintaining forts deep in Israel's territory (cf. 1 Sam. 13:19-14:5).

Over the twenty years, Samuel must have prayed and urged Israel to return to the Lord. The last words of 1 Samuel 7:2 provide the words Samuel was waiting for: "all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD." Twenty years of oppression had made Israel miss God's loving care and even to lament the absence of the Lord Himself. The apostle Paul says that "godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation" (2 Cor. 7:10). To see if this was true, godly grief, Samuel came forth to urge the people to return to the Lord. "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart," he called out, more as a challenge than a question. Rather than a fleeting remorse, Samuel sought to lead Israel in true repentance to restore the people to the Lord.

So intensely had they and their leaders offended God that He departed from them by sending away the Ark of the Covenant. The Lord gave them over to destruction, so that the name "Ichabod" (meaning, "the glory has departed") was rightly spoken of them. They had abandoned the true God for idols, indulging in gross sins, and in consequence they had fallen into bondage and misery. So, it ever is with sin. Jesus said, "everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin" (John 8:34), and Paul wrote, "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Sin leads to a miserable slavery that ends in death. So how can there be hope for sinners like the Israelites, who have offended God?

The answer is the mercy of God, who always welcomes sinners back when they come humbly seeking grace. God says: "Return to me,... and I will return to you" (Zech. 1:3). It was with this grace in mind that Samuel spoke to Israel about returning to the Lord: "And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart" (1 Sam. 7:3). This is the appeal that God has always made to those who are fallen in sin.

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Samuel first offered a sacrifice to atone for the peoples' sins. This is the only way that sinners can be forgiven by God and restored to His favour. The Bible says that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb. 9:22), for the simple reason that sin against God is deserving of death. When God forbade Adam from eating from the forbidden tree, He warned that "in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17). Thus, every transgression of God's law requires the penalty of death, for sin cannot be permitted to abide in God's holy presence. But God in His mercy has made a way of forgiveness, through the substitute of another to pay the penalty for sin. That substitute - symbolised in the Old Testament by sacrificial animals - is God's own Son who came into the world to "save his people from their sins" (Mt. 1:21).

This is the message that Christians share before the world: there is forgiveness through the atoning blood of Christ. There is no other way that will bring sinful men and women into God's favour and no other gospel that will speak true peace to our hearts. This is what Martin Luther discovered. People attempt all manner of ways to gain favour with God and Luther tried practically all of them. He offered good works as a monk, he undertook sacred quests and made special offerings, he sought mystical highs and he abased himself low before the church confessors. But none of these attempts succeeded for Luther, for the simple reason that none had God's written approval. Therefore Luther turned to the Bible, where he learned the gospel, he wrote, "nothing but the story of how Christ stepped into our sins, carried them on the cross in his flesh, and destroyed them, so that all who believe in him are set free from sin through him."


This is what the apostles taught. Paul wrote that "In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses" (Eph. 1:7). John taught, "the blood of Jesus [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jn. 1:7).

Peter says, "you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Pet. 1:18-19). The message of Samuel's sacrifice, and the message of all the Bible is twofold: no sinner may come before God's holiness without atoning blood, but also that any sinner may come through the precious blood of Christ.

Samuel's lamb was a picture of Christ as our sacrifice, but Samuel himself was a picture of Christ as our priest. "Samuel cried out to the LORD" (1 Sam. 7:9), so that the people would be accepted. Like Israel, we are reconciled to God through the mediating ministry of one sent by God - one who is both God and man, the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews, reminds us that the risen Lord Jesus lives and reigns forever, and that "he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). Ralph Davis comments: "In Samuel's intercession on Israel's behalf... we see a picture of the office of Christ as our high priest... Here is the true secret of our steadfastness: we rely on the prayers of Another whose prayers are always effectual. Nothing is quite so moving as knowing that I am a subject of Jesus' intercessory prayer."

Samuel's simple explanation offered in the form of a memorial stone he set in place on the site tells us what really happened at Mizpah. He "called its name Ebenezer; for he said, 'Till now the Lord has helped us'" (1 Sam. 7:12). That is what happened at Mizpah: God helped His people by saving them from their enemies, just as He protects and preserves the souls of everyone who calls on His name in faith.

By erecting a memorial stone, Samuel was following in the footsteps of prior believers, especially Joshua. When God opened a way through the Jordan River for Israel to pass through, Joshua built a pile of stones to mark the event (Jos. 4:20-24). At the end of Joshua's life, when Israel gathered to renew the covenant at Shechem, Joshua set up a stone as a testimony (Jos. 24:26). Gordon Keddie writes, "The idea of these memorials was that they be a standing witness to what God had done in the past for his people, and to what he would yet do in time to come."



The curious feature on this occasion was the name Samuel gave to the memorial stone: Ebenezer. Ebenezer was the location of Israel's defeat twenty years earlier, many miles to the northwest. On that occasion the name of the place mocked Israel's failure: Ebenezer means "God has helped," yet God refused to help Israel because of unbelief. Now, acting in faith, Israel had experienced God's help, and Samuel seems to want to make this point clear. Robert Bergen writes, "All that was lost through sin in the first Ebenezer event was restored through repentance in the second."

Samuel specifies, "Till now the Lord has helped us" (1 Sam. 7:12). By this, he reminds Israel that this recent victory is just the latest in a long history of God's mighty redemptive acts. It is because of a long chain of mercies that Israel exists in blessing. Samuel aims for the people to remember what God has done "till now," so that in the future they will appeal to Him in faith again.

This argues that Christians should make memorials of God's grace in their own lives. There will be times when we turned to the Lord sincerely and He gave us His peace, He met our need, and He strengthened our faith to endure a trial. God has been there for us in the past, so we are encouraged to trust Him for today and tomorrow. The hymn, drawn from this passage, says, "Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by thy help I'm come / And I hope, by thy good pleasure; safely to arrive at home." Christians do not live in the past, but we do live out of the past: we remember how God has proved His faithfulness and love, and therefore we hope anew to arrive safely at home.

Of course, the great event to which we look in gratitude, is memorialised by the Ebenezer stone of the Lord's Supper and is the cross of Jesus Christ. Looking to the cross, where God gave His own Son to save us from our sins, no Christian can truly doubt God's help. ***With the cross in view, we say, "O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be / let that grace now, like a fetter, bind my wand'ring heart to thee."***

Samuel's Ebenezer stone was designed to inspire God's people to thanksgiving for the victory God had graciously given and to remind them not to forsake God's help by turning away to other gods.

For the rest of his life, Samuel remained as judge over Israel. "And he went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah. And he judged Israel in all these places. Then he would return to Ramah, for his home was there, and there also he judged Israel. And he built there an altar to the LORD" (1 Sam. 7:16-17). By traveling to different regions, Samuel's leadership served to unite the tribes of Israel, and in this way set the stage for the kingship that followed. While these words sum up years of ministry that followed the victory at Ebenezer, we can have little doubt regarding the message Samuel continually brought before the people, a message that is as true and urgent today as ever: "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods... and direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only... for till now the Lord has helped us." May we never forget that grace, relying on the Lord's help in all our times of need.

HYMN

Come, Thou Fount of every blessing
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace
Streams of mercy, never ceasing
Call for songs of loudest praise
Teach me some melodious sonnet
Sung by flaming tongues above
Praise the mount, I'm fixed upon it
Mount of Thy redeeming love

Here I raise my Ebenezer
Here there by Thy great help I've come
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure
Safely to arrive at home
Jesus sought me when a stranger
Wandering from the fold of God
He, to rescue me from danger
Interposed His precious blood



WORSHIP UPDATE

Oh, to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be
Let that goodness like a fetter
Bind my wandering heart to Thee
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love
Here's my heart, oh, take and seal it
Seal it for Thy courts above
Here's my heart, oh, take and seal it
Seal it for Thy courts above

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for the word of the Gospel. We pray as we study it together and read it and reread it and try to soak it in privately and together and as it is expounded to us, we pray for its life transforming power to transform our lives too, and this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION

And now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all this day and forevermore, Amen.

It is now 5 months since we last gathered for worship at Ferintosh Parish Church. So much has taken place since then and the world we ere used to will be different from now on.

Given the necessary restrictions imposed on us all and the limits on numbers able to gather it is not possible for us to meet as a congregation and this position is likely to last for a number of months yet.

In order that when we are able to meet as a congregation we do so safely and in a controlled manner a small group of our Kirk Session Elders are working on plans and risk assessments for the use of our church and hall. This work is a requirement of Ross Presbytery in order that any use of a church building has been given proper consideration. These plans and assessments will be important to have for the point where the Government and Presbytery consider it possible for congregations to meet subject to certain limits and behaviour. The group will present their plan to the Kirk Session and then it will be implemented or amended as required by the current advice at that time.

In the meantime please continue to support those around you and share the Worship at Home with friends or neighbours.