

Monday morning! Winter is encroaching on us. But the warmth of God's Word is a great blessing to us. Here is our Devotional for today. God bless you, for together we know that "Thus far, the Lord has helped us!"

EBENEZER – YOU, LORD, HAVE HELPED ME!

A Devotional prepared by Dr. Robert L. Morris

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"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.'" 1 Samuel 7:12; NKJV

It is the year 2021 for all of us on the Gregorian Calendar. In many churches, including those of the "evangelical" nature, there is a struggle ... so serious in some churches that it can well be called "an evangelical war." The general focus of this struggle rests in the question: "what music shall we use in our worship services?" We throw around certain terms related to this struggle, such as "traditional," "contemporary," "modern," "blended," and "compromised." Unfortunately, this struggle has been the cause for some local churches experiencing a downward trend in attendance. The issue has to a significant extent been a notable conflict between the "older" and the "younger" church goers.

In this light, I was discussing the issue of Church music with someone, and one of the great hymns was brought into the discussion. The hymn: "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," the lyrics of which were penned by Robert Robinson in 1758. Old? Yes. The problem pointed out to me was: "The second verse begins with 'Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by Thy help I'm come.'" The question asked of me: "Who in the world knows what 'Ebenezer' means?" My response focused on: "The Pastor surely knows. The Director of Music knows. The Bible teachers in the church know. It is interpreted plainly in 1 Samuel 7:12." I do not believe I convinced my questioner. I still love that old hymn, and I do so, in part at least, because I have learned the meaning of the word "Ebenezer."

This Devotional is NOT a study or review of the worship music used in our churches. The Pastor and/or the Music Director have the responsibility to explain the meaning of such words in a song. Let's leave it there. This Devotional has nothing to do with Mr. Robinson's hymn lyrics. It has to do with the occasion for and the use of the word "Ebenezer" in Scripture. I will make a concluding statement in defense of the use of this great Biblical word later in this study.

I am convinced that when the scrolls of record are unfolded before us in eternity, we will be literally amazed at the innumerable times the Lord has helped us.

Let's look into the Bible, the Word of God, and discover some encouraging truth relating to the word "help." We turn first to the Old Testament. Any of you Hebrew scholars will readily follow this; others will have to trust the translations included. Bless you!

1. A REPORT OF HELP. Our key verse is 1 Samuel 7:12. It is a verse that rehearses clearly the report of the prophet Samuel after Israel won a battle against the Philistines. The Hebrew text states that Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen, "and called its name Ebenezer, and saying, 'Thus far Yahweh has helped us.'" The Hebrew text is: וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שֵׁמֶה אֶבְנֵי הַעֲזָרָה וַיֹּאמֶר הַעֲזָרָה עֵד־וַיִּהְיֶה עֲזָרָנוּ הַנָּה עַד־וַיִּהְיֶה עֲזָרָנוּ הַנָּה עַד־ (1 Samuel 7:12) The "Ebenezer" part of this verse is in the two words הַעֲזָרָה אֶבְנֵי - "Eben ezer." Literally, these two Hebrew words translate as "אֶבְנֵי - a stone - הַעֲזָרָה - of help." Literally, this translates as "a stone, the one that has helped." Therefore, when formed into one word, the meaning carries through and is used to identify the place between Mizpah and Shen, called by Samuel "Ebenezer." It is the form of this compound word used in the final part of Samuel's statement, עֲזָרָנוּ - "has helped us" with the final word, יְהוָה - "Yahweh," that clarifies Samuel's use of הַעֲזָרָה אֶבְנֵי - "Eben - ezer." In the context of 1 Samuel 7:12, then, we find the glorious reality that it is the Lord God who has helped us. Folks, it just doesn't get any better than that! This should be our universal daily, and consistent declaration ... for "Ebenezer ... the LORD has helped us!"

Another strong report of God's help comes from King Jehoshaphat. Here, we turn to 2 Chronicles 18:31. Jehoshaphat was king of Judah. He was in a conflicting discussion with Ahab, king of Israel. The issue before them was an ensuing conflict (war) with Ramoth Gilead facing Israel. The discussion is recorded in 2 Chronicles 18. The specific focus of their discussion was the need for Divine wisdom. "Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, 'Please inquire for the word of the LORD today.'" (vs 4) King Ahab gathered 400 "prophets" together, and asked: "Shall we go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or shall I refrain?" (vs 5) The prophets answered: "Go up, for God will deliver it into the king's hand." (vs 5b) Obviously King Jehoshaphat was uncomfortable with this response, and asked: "Is there not still a prophet of the LORD here, that we may inquire of him?" (vs 6) King Ahab answered: "There is still one many by whom we may inquire of the LORD; but I hate him, because he never prophesies good concerning me, but always evil. He is Micaiah the son of Imla." (vs 7) King Jehoshaphat rebuked King Ahab, Micaiah was called, and persuaded the kings he would respond with integrity. King Ahab was totally displeased with Micaiah's prophecy, and had him imprisoned. King Ahab persuaded King Jehoshaphat to join him in going to Ramoth Gilead. There King Ahab "tricked" King Jehoshaphat, disguising himself, but telling King Jehoshaphat to wear his royal attire. The King of Syria had told his fighting men to fight only the king of Israel. Seeing Jehoshaphat in kingly attire, and now knowing the difference, attacked King Jehoshaphat. At that point, Jehoshaphat called out to the Lord, עָנֵנוּ יְיָ הַיְיָהוָה - "and the LORD helped him." (vs 31) The Lord allowed Jehoshaphat to be wounded, but restored his health, and "Jehoshaphat returned safely to his house in Jerusalem." (2 Chronicles 19:1) Here is the same three-letter Hebrew word עָנַן with the pronoun suffix indicating the one from whom the help came.

You may also want to read the report from King Uzziah, who also reported God's help in a serious time of need. "God helped him against the Philistines, against the Arabians who lived in Gur Baal, and against the Meunites. Also, the Ammonites brought tribute to Uzziah. His fame spread as far as the entrance to Egypt, for he became exceedingly strong." (Read 2 Chronicles 26:7)

When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be. We will all see Jesus, sing the song of victory, and then be able to remember the long-forgotten times ... nearly uncountable ... when the Lord helped us, saved our lives, healed us from deadly diseases, protected us from unknown dangers, and so on and on and on and on! Oh! How wonderful that day will be.

2. A REQUEST FOR HELP. Here we turn to Psalm 30: 10, and hear King David "singing" his request for God's help. The "Sweet Singer of Israel" put many of his messages, including his prayers to God, into the form of poetry, singing them in his act of worship. In Psalm 30, we note such addresses to God as "I will extol You, O LORD, for You have lifted me up, and have not let my foes rejoice over me. O LORD my God, I cried out to You, and You healed me. O LORD, You brought my soul up from the grave; You have kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit. Sing praise to the LORD, you saints of His, and give thanks at the remembrance of His holy name." (Psalm 30:1-4; NKJV)

The theme of one of David's greatest "hymns" has wafted on the wings of the centuries, capturing the poetic heart of many musicians: "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning." (Psalm 30:5b; NKJV) But in this same Psalm, the mighty, God-anointed King of Israel confessed his great need. "What profit is there in my blood, when I do down to the pit? Will the dust praise You? Will it declare your truth? Hear, O LORD, and have mercy on me; LORD, be my helper." (Psalm 30:9, 10; NKJV) Here the Hebrew text uses the same word translated "helper." לִי עֲנֵן הַיְיָהוָה "LORD, be my helper." King David used the same word translated "helper," as found in the Hebrew text of his request, "LORD, be my helper." לִי עֲנֵן הַיְיָהוָה. There it is again, the word עָנַן, the word for "help" or "helper."

We can also turn to Psalm 79:9 and pray with the Sons of Asaph: "יִשְׁעֵנוּ אֱלֹהֵי עֲזָרָנוּ - "Help us, God of our salvation." Do you ... do I ... ever need to pray these same prayers asking for "help?" I have never met a person in my life-time who had no need to pray such a prayer. Many times daily we pray this same prayer, "LORD, be my helper."

3. A REALITY OF HELP. In the precious Word of God we find King David's personal testimony of experiencing the reality of God's help in his life. Every one believing in God, having experienced the joy of salvation through His beloved Son, and walking with faith and trust in and reliance on Him, can give the same witness. We find it in Psalm 54:4. David declares: לִי עֹזֵר אֱלֹהִים הַגָּבֹהַ - "Behold, God the Almighty One (Elohim) is my helper." In this personal declaration of the reality of the help of God in his life, King David is affirming the first eloquent statement of the Bible relating to the Person of God. It is in Genesis 1:1. We recall the statement: "In the beginning God..." - Elohim - the Almighty, the Eternal, the Uncreated, the All-powerful, the All-knowing, the Everywhere-present, Creator of the Universe is his personal helper. God's "help" is available to those who ask Him. His promise is real. Trust Him! Ask Him! Believe Him! How easy it is for people ... yes, even Christian people ... to enjoy "good times" and give only token acknowledgement to God, when in reality, it IS the LORD GOD who blesses us so! Did you ask Him? Did He answer? Thank Him and praise Him, and share your witness with others.

4. A REASSURANCE OF HELP. In the Book of Psalms there is one Psalm written by King Solomon. Psalm 72 is beautifully Messianic in nature. In this sense it is prophetic, speaking of the majestic rule of the Messiah, citing the plethora of relationships over which He is the Almighty Ruler. I am including the Hebrew text because there are some readers who will appreciate this inclusion: וְעָנִי וְאִי-עֹזֵר לּוֹ מִשְׁנֹעַ אֶבְיָוֹן יִצִּיל בֵּי - "For He will deliver the needy person when he cries, and help to the one who has no help." (Psalm 72:12; my translation) Take note of those two absolutely vital words, "He will." Two other words carry the message of God so clearly: "deliver" from being needy, and "help" during those moments when there is no other source of help ... and that is usually always and in every circumstance!

The Sons of Korah produced a song that celebrates the powerful triumph of God in our lives. The "song" is Psalm 46. The first five verses read as follows, and include that reassuring and powerful Hebrew word עֹזֵר - "ā - zēr," in verses one and five, meaning "a "help." "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its swelling. There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God shall help her, just at the break of dawn." (vs 1, "help" is in noun form, and in vs-5 it is in verb form.) The Hebrew text here is אֱלֹהִים יִעֲזֶרְהָ "God shall help her."

The reference to "a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God" symbolize the constant flow of God's blessings upon His people. Where God is ... omnipresent ... His power to help is there! No wonder the Psalm includes: "The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge." (vss 7 and 11)

Is there a New Testament corollary with this strong Old Testament concept of Divine help to which the word "Ebenezer" can be attached? Absolutely yes! In the New Testament, the Greek word for "help" is συναντιλαμβάνομαι - pronounced as "soon - āntee - lām - bān - ě - tie." It is used only twice in the New Testament. The first is in Luke 10:40, when Martha requested of Jesus that Mary help her. It is also used by the Paul in Romans 8:26. From this use we glean the importance of this powerful Greek word. It is a compound word consisting of two prepositions prefixed to a verb. These are as follows:

1. The preposition σύν means "together with."
2. The preposition άντι means "opposite; the other side of."
3. The verb λαμβάνειν (infinitive form) means "to grasp hold of."

Therefore, the compound word carries the idea of taking hold of something with someone else on the other or opposite side. The Greek word in its compound form is then observed as "together with on the opposite side of ... grasping hold of." The Holy Spirit comes along side us, and on the opposite side of where we are in relation to whatever the issue may be, takes hold of that issue, "helping our human weakness." And THAT is the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It is the New Testament corollary to the word "help" as discovered and defined earlier in this Devotional. Here is the highest level of the "God-and-person" synergism on this planet. This is the New Testament version of "Ebenezer."

Now, does the word “Ebenezer” take on new meaning for you? I trust it will, and especially as we sing again Isaac Watts’ familiar hymn, composed in 1719, and using the 1708 music of William Croft.

O GOD, OUR HELP IN AGES PAST

1. O God, our Help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
Our Shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.
 2. Under the shadow of Thy throne still may we dwell secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone, and our defense is sure.
 3. Before the hills in order stood, or earth received her frame,
From everlasting Thou art God, to endless years the same.
- EBENEZER – THUS FAR THE LORD HAS HELPED US!