

# Final Service In the Current Sanctuary

**"Till now the Lord has helped us"**

1 Samuel 7:1-13

Mark Vroegop

---

*And the men of Kiriath-jearim came and took up the ark of the Lord and brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill. And they consecrated his son Eleazar to have charge of the ark of the Lord. 2 From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord.*

*3 And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." 4 So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and they served the Lord only.*

*5 Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you." 6 So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the Lord and fasted on that day and said there, "We have sinned against the Lord." And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah. 7 Now when the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines. 8 And the people 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 So Samuel took a nursing lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. And Samuel cried out to the Lord for Israel, and the Lord answered him. 10 As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel. But the Lord thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion, and they were routed before Israel. 11 And the men of Israel went out from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them, 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; for he said, "Till now the Lord has helped us." 13 So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel. And the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel (1 Sam 7:1-13).*

Today is a special day in the life of College Park Church. This Sunday marks the last service that we will hold in our present sanctuary, and the last time that the Word will be preached from this location. Since 1997 this room has served as the Sunday morning gathering place for our church, and today we are going to reflect on God's goodness to us as He has met with us week after week.

Now most of us were not a part of the very beginning of College Park. When you look back over the years, you get a clear sense that God's hand has been on this place in some remarkable ways. This view has prompted my pastoral mission to be "don't mess it up, Mark!"

## **A Brief History**

College Park Church was birthed twenty-six years ago in 1985. A group of Bible-believing churches, the Indiana Fellowship of Regular Baptist Churches, had a vision for planting a church in the northern part of Indianapolis – an area that was showing promise of growth and expansion. At the time Carmel, Indiana, was just over 20,000 people compared to the population which now exceeds 70,000.

This fellowship of churches called Kimber Kauffman who was pastoring a church in La Rue, Ohio, to plant this new church. A Bible study was started with ten families who met at the Holiday Inn in Casino Room B. God blessed the faithful exposition of the Word and the commitment of these believers to one another, and the church began to grow. It wasn't long until the church outgrew the Holiday Inn and relocated to a nearby warehouse.

In 1986 it was clear that a permanent location was needed for this growing body of believers, and a search began for property. In June ten acres were purchased at 96<sup>th</sup> and Towne. Over the years, God miraculously allowed College Park to acquire additional property leading to our existing 35 acres today.

In 1992 the first sanctuary was built at 96<sup>th</sup> and Towne, and it could hold about 450 people. We know that space as Worship2 or the fellowship hall. The building cost just under a million dollars and was paid off in three years. By now College Park was averaging over 1,000 each Sunday.

After adding church offices and additional classrooms, the present sanctuary was built in 1997. It cost just over 3 million and was paid off a year later (I hope you are starting to see a pattern). This sanctuary holds about 900 people, and it wasn't long until three services became the norm at College Park. Attendance continued to grow, a great staff team developed and College Park was consistently over 2,000 people each Sunday.

Looking back it is really an amazing story of God's faithfulness. Over a period of 20 years, College Park Church purchased 32 acres of property, built five buildings, paid every building off in less than four years, planted two churches, gave a total of 3.2 million to missions through Christmas offerings, and grew from 10 families to over 2,000. And like every church, there were seasons of great blessing and seasons of testing and trial. Through it all, God's hand has been upon this church.

Here we are in 2011. In the last three years we've grown almost 70% - from 2,100 to 3,500, the budget has grown by 50%, we expanded our ministry in Brookside, we've given away 1.7 million to local and global outreach, and we embarked on an effort to expand our facilities to match our mission. In the midst of the Great Recession we asked you for 12 million and you committed 15 million. Next week we move into our new sanctuary.

God has been so faithful. Every week God has been true to his Word, and we've been able to taste and see that the Lord is good! God has embedded certain values into the fabric of our church - the pre-eminence of Jesus, the authority of the Word, redemptive community, Biblical unity in

diversity, extravagant grace, and the call to go! This is the story – God’s story - of what has happened at College Park Church, what has happened in this very room, and what will be our future in a new sanctuary.

### **Memorials Are Important**

I share all of this with you so that you do not miss the beauty of what God has done in our midst. I share this with you so that you realize what you are privileged to be a part of. My hope is that today, in a figurative sense, is a bit of a memorial for you – a time to remember, reflect, and rejoice.

Throughout the Bible memorials are important. There is a real danger in forgetting what God has done, and that is why remembering God’s past actions are so important. A few examples:

- The Passover Meal was designed to be a memorial of God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt (Ex 12:14)
- The Feast of Tabernacles was to be a symbol of the years of wilderness wanderings so that the people would not forget (Lev 23:43)
- The ephod worn by the High Priest included two stones that were engraved with the names of Israel and placed on the shoulder “as stones of remembrance” (Ex 28:12)
- When Israel crossed into the promised land, they set up twelve stones as a reminder of God’s faithfulness (Josh 4:1-7)
- When Israel renewed their covenant with God after they entered the promise land, they erected a large stone near the sanctuary (Josh 24:25-27)

And of course, who could forget the most significant memorial in the entire Bible: the Lord’s Supper. The Apostle Paul records the words of Jesus who said that we ought to celebrate this meal “in remembrance of me” (1 Cor 11:27).

### **The Ebenezer Memorial**

There is one memorial moment that I want to look at closely today. It is found in 1 Samuel 7, and it is a great story about a memorial called “The Ebenezer” which means “till now the Lord has helped us.”

The background of the story is really important. During this time in Israel’s history there was no king. Prophets spoke for God and ruled the people. One of the greatest prophets was a man named Samuel. Additionally, there was no temple, and God’s presence was directly tied to the Ark of the Covenant.

The arch-enemy of Israel during this time was the Philistines, who had won a humiliating battle against Israel near the city of Ebenezer. 1 Samuel 4 tells us that Hophi and Phineas, two wicked sons of the prophet Eli, took the Ark of the Covenant into the thick of battle thinking that God would give them the victory. However, God judged these two wicked sons by killing them in the battle, and the Ark of the Covenant was captured.

The loss of the Ark amounted to the loss of God's presence for the people of Israel, and it was a sign of God's judgment. After seven months, the Philistines began experiencing all kinds of divine curses because of the Ark, and they decided to send it back to Israel. They put the ark on cart with two milking cows – not oxen – to see what would happen. The cows pulled the cart back to Israel, and it was cared for by a man name Eleazar for twenty years (1 Sam 7:1-2).

At some point Samuel appeared with a call for renewal and repentance (7:3) – *“If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroath from among you and direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.”*

After the people responded positively (7:4), Samuel calls them to Mizpah, a city about seven miles north of Jerusalem, which was a familiar meeting place for special moments in Israel's history. Later in 1 Samuel, Saul will be presented as king in this city. So you could think of it like the mall in Washington, D.C. Samuel calls them to this location for the purpose of national renewal – *“gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you”* (1 Sam 7:5).

So the entire nation gathered at Mizpah, they poured out water before the Lord as a sign of their repentance, fasted, and cried out to the Lord in confession (1 Sam 7:6). It must have been a great moment as the people returned back to God with all their heart. But this spiritual highlight was not without an immediate crisis.

1 Samuel 7:7 tells us that the Philistines heard about this gathering of the entire nation, and they must have either mistaken it for a military act or saw it as a prime opportunity. The result was that the Philistines marshaled forces to attack the people of Israel. When the people heard this news, they were understandably afraid. It was only twenty years earlier that they had lost a terrible battle, lost the Ark, and now – just when they were getting right with God – another attack comes.

Ever felt like that? It is often the case that when things just begin to turn around that the enemy throws whatever he can at us to discourage, dishearten, or destroy the work that God is doing. Just when things were looking brighter, it got incredibly dark.

Therefore, they ask for Samuel to intercede for them and to cry out for God's help and deliverance. They knew that God was their only hope, and they begged for Samuel to pray for them (7:8). Verse 9 tells us what Samuel did: *“So Samuel took a nursing lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. And Samuel cried out to the Lord for Israel, and the Lord answered him.”*

Can you see the scene? The Philistine army is approaching as Samuel is offering the lamb (7:10). Unless God does something, it is going to be – to borrow from Yogi Berra – déjà vu all over again. But look what happens!

*10 As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel. But the Lord thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion, and*

*they were routed before Israel. 11 And the men of Israel went out from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them, as far as below Beth-car (1 Sam 7:10-11).*

God showed up! He delivered them. They cried out to God, and he rescued them. He saved them. And to celebrate this great moment Samuel set up a monument or a memorial stone as a symbol of what God did in this city of Mizpah. Verse 12 tells us that he set up this stone and called it Ebenezer.

Now I'm sure that the symbolic name of the memorial was not lost on anyone. After all it was at Ebenezer that the glory of God had been lost. Ebenezer was the darkest day anyone could remember. The very presence of God had been taken away. But now everything had changed.

Samuel erects a monument of God's faithfulness, and he calls it Ebenezer which means "till now the Lord has helped us." And from that point forward everyone who saw the stone and said the name Ebenezer thought about two battles: the first one that was so dark and the second one which was so glorious. The Ebenezer stone was a marker to remember that til now the Lord has helped us.

### **Ebenezer Moments**

"Till now the Lord has helped us." That is not just true for Israel; it is true for us as well. And I can imagine that you can think of moments in your life when God showed up and delivered you right in this very room. You know what I'm talking about, don't you?

You came to Sunday worship and by virtue of the songs that were sung or the message that was given, you knew that God was here. You knew that what was happening, what was being said was just for you. You knew that your eyes were now open. You sensed the conviction of God's Spirit. You received comfort from God's word in a way that could only be designed by a God who knows exactly what you need. Oh what mercy it is to know that God does that – that he still does that.

This room has been a special room. For some of you it was the place that you heard and understood the gospel for the first time. For others of you it was the place where God uncovered your sin to you. For some it was the place where you found comfort in the midst of a great and terrible personal crisis. This room has been a place of warmth, a place of mercy, a place of conviction, and a place of hope.

Everything about what has happened in this room declares "till now the Lord has helped us." This has been the room where God has met with us in extraordinary ways. We've sung, we've listened, we've laughed, we've cried, we've mourned, we've comforted, we've prayed, we've dedicated, we've anointed, we've celebrated, and we've repented. All in this room. All because of God.

The hymn-writer of *Come Thou Fount* got it right when he wrote:

*Here I raise my Ebenezer;  
Hither by Thy help I've come;*

*And I hope, by Thy good pleasure,  
Safely to arrive at home.*

Till now the Lord has helped us. Hither by thy help I've come. Don't ever forget what God has done in your life in this room.

### **The Greatest Ebenezer Moment**

It moved me as I read the story of Samuel that what happened near the stone called Ebenezer foreshadowed something even greater. Samuel as prophet, priest, and functional king is called upon by a repentant people to intercede on their behalf. They need God to intervene, to save them from a dark moment. Samuel offers a lamb and in that offering God thunders from heaven and saves his people.

You know where I'm going, don't you? The greatest moment in all of human history, the moment when God helped us in ways that we can hardly believe, happened not by virtue of a stone that was raised but a cross. It was there, on up-raised cross, that the Lamb of God was offered up for sin. It was there, at Calvary, that God shook the earth as his son absorbed the full wrath of a holy, sin-hating God. It was this offering and this God-man named Jesus who as prophet, priest and king fulfilled the plan of God and rescued his people from the danger of their sin.

So as meaningful as the Ebenezer stone was, the cross is even more meaningful. The Ebenezer stone says "till now the Lord has helped us," but this symbol means that "the Lord has helped us and he always will help us!"

In the fields of Mizpah, God took the past failure of a nation and he turned it into a statement of victory. And on the hill of Calvary, God took the failure of the entire human race and made restoration possible.

*Come Thou Fount* blends these two thoughts very well:

*Here I raise my Ebenezer;  
Hither by Thy 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.*

The greatest Ebenezer moment is when God rescues you from yourself. It is when he rescues you from the mess of life that you've made. The Lord has helped us over and over and over again, and for many of us it happened in this very room.

In light of this last moment in this sanctuary, let me ask you to do three things:

1. I want you to remember what God has done.
2. I want you to thank him. Express your gratitude to him.
3. I want for you to commit yourself to more years of listening, loving, and learning in the house of God.

For twenty-six years now, College Park Church has been a place where people have found out what it means to be passionate followers of Jesus. And that is going to continue at a whole new level in the new sanctuary.

But for today, let us just remember and celebrate in this space – “Till now the Lord has helped us!”

© College Park Church

**Permissions:** You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. [www.yourchurch.com](http://www.yourchurch.com)