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In the name of our faithful and loving God and Savior, dear friends,

She had been begging to go to Disneyland after seeing the commercials with the castle and the mouse. Now her dream had become reality. She was only 5 years old, but she was pretty brave—only wanting to ride “the scary rides,” the fast and sharp-turning ones. Dad sat next to his mouse-eared daughter on the little kid’s ride that she thought was the scariest. They buckled in and pulled the bar in front of them down to their laps and it began to move. Very quickly they were moving pretty fast for a 5 year old. Next was a sharp curve...and then another. And then her formerly brave face scrunched up in a terrified expression. Dad caught her eye and when she saw him smile and heard him yell above the noise of the ride “*Hey, this is fun!*” she started to smile and laugh also. What was terrifying became enjoyable! It turns out that brave little girl liked the smoother and slower parts of the ride a little better than the stressful parts, but she was able to finally enjoy those too because she knew her father was with her and it would be okay.

Our Heavenly Father allows us to go on some “scary rides” in life. He doesn’t do that to terrify us, but to cause us to catch his eye so that we can see that things are all right. He uses those stressful rides of life to remind us that he’s in control and that we can trust him. I can’t speak specifically tonight about how the past year went for each of you. I don’t know if your smooth weeks and months balanced out the “scary rides” that added tension to your life. But I do know this: that as we look back on the year now past, every single one of us here this evening can relate to God’s prophet Samuel who spoke for God’s people and said:

THUS FAR THE LORD HAS HELPED US

The Israelites had been on some scary rides over the last years. Do you remember the Ark of the Covenant? The Ark was that golden box about 4 feet long, 2½ feet wide and 2½ feet high with angels on the cover. It contained the 10 Commandment tablets, a pot of manna from Israel’s wandering, and Aaron’s staff. Moses would go and speak with God where that ark was placed in the tabernacle. It was obviously very important. Well, about 20 years prior to Samuel speaking the words before us tonight, this was the headline news in Israel: **So the Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. The ark of God was captured, and Eli’s two sons, Hophi and Phineas, died (1 Samuel 4:10-11).** (Eli was God’s priest) The enemies of God’s people even placed the Ark in the temple of a pagan god. It was returned to Israel in less than a year, but was no longer kept at Shiloh, the center of worship just 20 miles north of Jerusalem, because the Philistines had destroyed the city when they stole the Ark. It was then kept in the house of a man named Abinadab in Kiriath Jearim.

Now, after all these years, it seems that it had finally hit the people how much they missed their old worship life—Shiloh, the sanctuary there, the Ark of the Covenant. Their challenges had continued over the years and very often because of their own sin of idolatry. Really, they missed their God. So Samuel commanded the people to get rid of the false gods they had been serving and serve the Lord only. He gathered the people together at Mizpah where they fasted and confessed **We have sinned against the LORD (1 Samuel 7:6).**” And as the people gathered to rededicate themselves to God, the Philistines made their way toward Mizpah to attack them again. The very same enemies who had brought such physical and spiritual distress to God’s people 20 years before were back again. What a test of faith this would be. Did the people mean it—did they really love and trust in the Lord?

It was at this point that the people pleaded with Samuel to continue interceding with God on their behalf. Samuel did, and as he cried out to the Lord and offered a sacrifice to God, the Philistines advanced. And the LORD was faithful. Though his people had not always loved him or even acknowledged him, the LORD was faithful and remained with his people and this was no exception. He caused a disturbance, a panic among the Philistines enabling the Israelites to easily rout the enemy.

And then, to praise God from that time on, **Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, “Thus far has the LORD helped us.”** A stone monument marked the spot so that God’s people would always be reminded of the LORD’S faithful help.

What a great story! But it’s not just a story—it’s real; it’s history. We hear that story tonight not to be entertained as if we’re reading some new book that we got for Christmas. No, we hear that story to be reminded of something about the unchanging LORD who is our God also.

We are a lot like those Israelites at Samuel’s time. Those people endured significant challenges—physical, emotional, spiritual—and many times they brought it on with their sinful behavior. The LORD allowed difficulties in their life; he let them endure some “scary rides”. Does the same thing not happen to us? Think back over the last year. Think of the difficulties. Did you bring some of them on? I’m sure it’s true that we all have.

Some of us had illnesses or medical issues brought on by unhealthy behaviors or not caring for our bodies properly.

Sometimes we didn’t treat people especially well and our relationships have suffered.

We have been tormented by guilt and fear because we’ve done things God says are wrong—and we knew they were wrong.

We haven’t been the best at parenting and we know, deep down, that the kids behave the way they do, in part, because we’ve fostered it.

Our church has struggled a bit financially and when we’re honest with ourselves, we know that we’re partly to blame because of the way we’ve approached our own giving to the LORD.

We wondered where God was at certain times but there were enough Sundays when the LORD scanned the pews and he wondered where we were. And then he looked for us during the week, but we didn't give him the time of day on many days.

A loved one died and we endured more grief because we challenged God instead of humbly bowing before his holy will.

We stressed over deadlines and things we had to get done, but it was because we were lazy and didn't make use of the time the LORD allowed us to accomplish our tasks.

We screwed things up financially at home or in our business because we were greedy or envious or because we didn't have our priorities straight.

And in addition to these kinds of things, we endured many difficulties simply because we live in a sinful world. Life will simply be difficult this side of heaven. If you only look at the tough things, 2009 might not have been the best year. Israel lost sight of the LORD as their helper. The humble Christians in these church pews or in this pulpit tonight admit that they have done the same.

But we have something else in common with Samuel and those people of long ago. We can also say **"Thus far has the LORD helped us."** The LORD watched over them while they limped along and struggled, as they ignored him and did what they wanted, and as they tried to handle things themselves. The LORD was watching over them the whole time and in the hour of great need he was still their helper.

Is that not also true of us? Have there not been times over the last year where you have called out to the LORD, even pleaded with him like Samuel and the Israelites did?

Remember when you were sick and you prayed hard to be well again?

Remember when someone else was sick or hurt or troubled and you prayed even harder on their behalf?

Remember when you lost your job and you prayed for the LORD to send something your way?

Remember when you just didn't know what to do about your relationship with your kid or your spouse and you asked God to intervene?

Remember when you felt all alone or like everything was new and not very comfortable and you sought comfort from God?

Remember how things were bothering you and you came to church seeking the Lord's help and the sermon was just what you needed to hear or the comfort of a Christian friend was just what you needed?

Remember times like that? And look at you now. Here you are. The LORD has brought you through those things—and maybe he still is in some cases. But the point is the same: **"Thus far has the LORD helped us."** Samuel set up that stone memorial and he named it Ebenezer. That's kind of a funny-sounding name, but if you were reading this verse from your Bible, you'd see a footnote that tells you what Ebenezer means. It means "stone of help." Every time the Lord's people saw that monument, they would

recall how God had helped them, giving them victory over their enemy on the day they rededicated themselves to serving him.

You could go home and set up your own Ebenezer, I suppose. You could place a large stone somewhere in your landscape and you could name it Ebenezer if you want to. A “stone of help” like that could remind you that the LORD has helped you throughout your life. But you have other “Ebenezers” already. Every time you see a baptism as you did this past Sunday in church, are you not reminded of how the LORD has helped you? It is a blessing to witness a baptism, to see the Holy Spirit pouring out promise and blessing upon a person—baby or adult. But it’s also a blessing because you are reminded of your own baptism and how the LORD helped you by taking you—a totally sin-stained person—and washing you clean of sin, giving you forgiveness, making you holy, promising you heaven. When life gets tough you can remind yourself that you are a baptized child of God and the LORD dearly loves you. How’s that for an “Ebenezer?”

Or what about the other sacrament, one which many of you will receive tonight? Is that not a reminder of our LORD’s help? Jesus Christ, God’s Son, came to live in this world and obey every single command and expectation of our Heavenly Father only so that he could trade that perfection for our sinfulness as he gave his life on the cross. In the Lord’s Supper we receive that true body and blood of our Savior and with it the promise of forgiveness. As we receive those things, we remember how Jesus helped us. That’s something to look at! That’s an “Ebenezer!”

Or what about your Bible? Maybe you even have a few Bibles. They’re not just nice to look at or have a collection of or simply a symbol in your home or office or school desk that shows people you are a Christian kid or adult. No, your Bible is a “stone of help.” You open the pages. You read it. Whenever that happens, your LORD talks to you! He assures you of his love. He confirms his promises of forgiveness and salvation through Jesus. He encourages you by pointing you to heaven—the place you will most definitely be after you die. Your Bible is another “Ebenezer.”

Look at the family of faith you enjoy. You sit among people who love you and whom God sends as his agents of help from time to time as you need them. The LORD helps you through fellowship with these fellow believers and as you join them around God’s Word in study. You have a whole congregation of Ebenezers! You might even have one or two special “stones of help” whom you really appreciate.

We have sometimes lost sight of these gifts of God and of God as our helper over the last year...but the LORD is our faithful and loving helper! He has forgiven all our sins and wants us to remember that he is our help at all times—in good times and bad. The Lord has always helped his people in the past and **Thus Far The Lord Has Helped Us too**. This evening as we review the Lord’s faithfulness and look forward with hope in him, rededicate yourself to serving the faithful God who loves you and give him continuous thanks and praise in the new year that is before us and until you give him unending praise in heaven. Amen.