

Sermon: Rev. Dr. Rodney Kennedy
Sunday, June 20, 2021

The Ebenezer Rock and the Throne of Grace
II Corinthians 6:1 – 13

This doesn't sound like Paul at first glance. He's a towering intellectual force but here he says, "Our heart is open wide." Paul writes to his church at Corinth: "Remember that God has helped us." Here's one of Scripture's most important dynamics: God helps us.

There's confusion when it comes to God and help. Some folks like to say, "God helps those who help themselves." Well, that's not biblical. Truth be told those who help themselves are doing exactly that – helping themselves and that is where all the lying, stealing, cheating, and deceiving originates. There are people who say, "What's yours is mine." Then there are those who say, "What's mine is mine." And then there are those who say, "What's mine is yours" (AKA Good Samaritan).

Gardner Taylor: "If the Lord has helped you in the past, is it not a fair guess, a safe assumption, a reasonable faith that He will help you in the future? We do not know what the future holds, but we do know "grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

We come from a people who have always known you can count on God's help. When King Asa saw an Ethiopian army of a million men at his border, he said, "Help us, O Lord our God, for we rely on you." David said this about Goliath. "The same God who delivered me from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the giant." When God delivered Israel in the day of Samuel, here's what Samuel did: "Then Samuel took a stone and set it up and named it Ebenezer; for he said, 'Thus far the Lord has helped us.'" Paul, facing a contentious relationship with his church, calls

upon this spiritual resource by remembering that the Lord will help them. He quotes Isaiah: "On a day of salvation I have helped you," says the Lord.

The liturgy of the church prays, "Make haste to help us." In our digitized minds we put all the emphasis on haste rather than help. But the good book reminds us to wait on the Lord. Sometimes we get impatient with the Lord going, in our minds, too slow. God doesn't answer all cries for help on digital time.

Now, the Corinthian correspondence is a hot bed of conflict. When Paul says that he has been afflicted, he's not just talking about outside enemies; he's talking about fellow church members. The Corinthian correspondence pulls back the cover from the passive aggressive, perma-press smiles of pastor-congregation conflict and shows the bare truth – the realities of a preacher and a pastor struggling together to be faithful to the Lord. At one point Paul even asks the congregation: What would you prefer? "Am I to come to you with a **stick**, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?" A stick? I checked with the religious supply store. They don't sell pastor sticks. Jesus sent out his first preachers with no purse, no bag, and no sandals. Maybe he should have sent them with a stick – lambs among wolves. Even David had some smooth rocks and a sling. Paul comes with a gentle spirit.

Being vulnerable, Paul opens his heart: "We were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself." "I wrote you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you."

Picture God's help with a couple of biblical metaphors. Paul lays the stone of Ebenezer on the church at Corinth. Ebenezer means "God has helped us." In the KJV we read, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us." "Hitherto" means "until now," "so far," "up to this present moment." The Lord has helped us in the past and the Lord will help us in the future. Harry Potter has the sorcerer's

stone, but we have the stone of remembrance. Paul counts on the help of Almighty God. You can't trust the promises of politicians; they are hunting votes. You can't trust the claims of all the advertisers; they will sell you all they can. You can't always trust the big corporations; they have a budget item for paying fines for when they get caught stealing. You can trust God to help. The Ebenezer Stone has been laid in homes by Christians suffering from long-term illness, parents suffering with wayward children, spouses dealing with abuse, and on and on it goes. God never runs out of Ebenezer stones. The Ebenezer Stone has been laid in places across America and we call them churches. I once preached at a church named Ebenezer Baptist Church. "God Has Helped Us" Baptist Church. As long as there are Ebenezer Rocks, we are not finished. Help is on the way. God helps us! When the rains fall, the floods come, and the winds blow and beat on our house, we will not fall, because we are founded on the Ebenezer Rock. Emmanuel Friedens has two Ebenezer stones: The Ebenezer stone of Friedens UCC and the Ebenezer stone of Emmanuel Baptist – two equal stones, twice the power.

We can trust that God's past help means there will be present help. Help crosses all the tenses: "I was helped. I am being helped. I will be helped." Trust is at the heart of Christian faith. To trust means to put our whole heart into the promises of God. Rowan Williams says that we can trust that God is working for us. The Apostle's Creed is a statement of our trust: "I trust in God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." It's similar to what the Buddhists declare: "I take refuge in Buddha – the Buddha is where I belong, the Buddha is what I have confidence in to keep me safe."

Paul's focuses not on the problems in the church, but on the power of God. Our history, no matter its victories and atrocities, contains a powerful pedagogy of past promises. When our minds and hearts are open, we learn how to live in the present and prepare for the future on the basis of past experiences. What a

disaster it would be to start each new day without any prior knowledge or experience. If you think the movie Groundhog Day was a disaster, imagine starting every day with a blank slate.

Can I get a witness? God told Isaiah one day, "Testify to Israel. Speak tenderly to her and cry to her, "You will be comforted." Then the Lord spoke again: "Get you up on a high mountain and testify as a herald of good news. Lift up your voice with strength. See the Lord comes with might. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry him in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." Sometimes we need a hug from the Lord. We need to see the vision of the Lord gathering us in his arms as if we were baby lambs and holding us close and giving us warmth and assurance.

Well, I testify that you can trust God. The Lord can strengthen you where you are weak, empower you where you are failing, inspire you where you have lost hope. Isaiah testified, "Those who wait for the Lord, shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Maybe you don't feel or running. Maybe your burdens are too great to lift you off the ground. There's still a promise for you. You can walk and God will walk with you, and you will not faint.

Novelist Charlie Crews says that after his six-year-old son drowned in a swimming pool accident, that he was in total despair. In an interview he said, "Grief can kill you." He told his uncle, the man who had been father to him, "I don't know what to do." His uncle, a man with a big heart and experience, said, "You are gonna do the next thing."

The writer of Hebrews, perhaps a woman, testifies: "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Look, you may have a desire to get to the next ball game, or the next concert, or the next sale, or the next cocktail party, or to the

grand opening of a new restaurant, or to the mall, or to a hot vacation spot, or to a weekend away, but from time to time, you will need to get yourself to the throne of grace. The church is that throne of grace. The church is wherever the table of the Eucharist resides and the throne of grace is established. The table and the throne together!!!!

Now, take Ebenezer – the Lord has helped us – and merge it with the throne of grace. That’s what we have going for us in our trials: At the throne of grace, God helps us in our troubles.

The relationship of pastor and people will grow stronger and there will be more love and more support for one another if we are beating a daily path to the throne of grace. If we are clinging to the Ebenezer Rock, we will not fail because we are on the Ebenezer Rock. Help will come. Because I believe that God and baseball are a matched pair, I tell you this baseball story. Aaron Boone was facing Tim Wakefield and the Red Sox for the American League championship. He came to bat in the ninth inning of game seven. He was nervous as you can imagine. As Boone waited on deck, Derek Jeter, a Yankee legend, approached Boone as he stood in the on-deck circle. Sensing Boone’s tension, Jeter told him not to worry: “The ghosts will come.” Jeter meant the Yankee greats who had won 26 World Series: Ruth, Gehrig, DiMaggio, Mantle. Boone’s attitude changed. He hit the first pitch for a game-winning homerun. “The ghosts came.” Well, the only ghost I’m offering is the Holy Ghost who always comes when we are between a rock and a hard place. God helps!

Some days the heart has the main part and is the star of the drama. Pastor, open your heart wide to your people. People of God, open your hearts wide to your pastor. As the curtain drops on our drama, we see ourselves on our knees at the throne of grace, clinging to the Ebenezer Rock with a bright light shining overhead. The Lord has helped us, is helping us, and will help us. Amen.