

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 3, 2021**

HITHERTO

1 Samuel 7:7-13

At long last we have turned the page from the year 2020 to 2021 with a collective shout of “Good riddance!” We’re glad, maybe even ecstatic, that 2020 is finally over. Of course, simply turning the calendar from December to January doesn’t mean that the circumstances of life have magically changed. The coronavirus still remains a force to be reckoned with. The CDC now reports that more than 20 million Americans have tested positive for the virus, with more than 340,000 COVID-related deaths in the US since the pandemic began early last year. And it is not over yet.

It would be a mistake, though, to think that nothing good took place in 2020. Mary Sue and I rejoiced in the births of our 3rd and 4th grandchildren. Our grandson Henry was born to Erin and David on April 1 (no fooling!), and is now a happy, healthy 9-month-old. Our granddaughter Sloane was born 6 weeks later, on May 14, to Lindsay and Dan. She too is flourishing by God’s grace. My mother Arlene Smith came to live with us last May, and we have been blessed to have her with us in this season of her life. Here at church, while the ministries of Julie Cloutier, Mike Bittenbender, and Joanna Knoles came to an end in 2020, we are thrilled that the Lord brought Pastor Chris and Lisa Popadich, and Donna Young to serve with us at Faith. Not everything about 2020 was forgettable. Many of you have had milestone moments of joy and celebration in the past year as well.

I read a devotional by Charles Spurgeon in his book *Morning & Evening* recently that touched my heart. Though written well over a century ago, it is a message that speaks to me today. It is based on 1 Samuel 7:12, which tells of Samuel setting up a memorial stone near Mizpah, an ancient town about 7 or 8 miles north of Jerusalem. The stone monument memorialized the victory God had given Israel over their nemesis, the Philistines. This took place before the establishment of the monarchy in Israel, before Samuel, who served God as Israel’s leader and judge, anointed Saul as the first king of Israel.

We are told in 1 Samuel 4 that in an earlier battle, the Philistines had captured the Ark of the Covenant, which was a symbol of God’s presence with and graciousness toward His people Israel. But things did not go well for the Philistines while the Ark was in their possession. Eventually, they decided to return the Ark to the Israelites (1 Samuel 6). It was taken first to a place called Beth Shemesh and then to the town of Kiriath Jearim, where it remained for 20 years until a wave of repentance and revival washed over the people of Israel.

The Message describes what took place at Mizpah this way: “When the Philistines heard that Israel was meeting at Mizpah, the Philistine leaders went on the offensive. Israel got the report and became frightened – Philistines on the move again! They pleaded with Samuel: ‘Pray with all your might! And don’t let up! Pray to GOD, our God, that He’ll save us from the boot of the Philistines.’”

“Samuel took a young lamb ... and offered it as a Whole-Burnt-Offering to GOD. He prayed fervently to GOD, interceding for Israel. And GOD answered.

“While Samuel was offering the sacrifice, the Philistines came within range to fight Israel. Just then GOD thundered, a huge thunderclap exploding among the Philistines. They panicked – mass confusion – and ran helter-skelter from Israel.”

That day God gave Israel a great victory over the Philistines. To commemorate this occasion, “Samuel took a single rock and set it upright between Mizpah and Shen. He named it ‘Ebenezer’ (Rock of Help), saying: [‘thus far the LORD has helped us’] (NIV).”

“Thus far the LORD has helped us.” The old King James Version says: “Hitherto has the LORD helped us” (7:12). I like that word – *hitherto*. It is an old-fashioned word, not one we use in our everyday conversation. Here is what Spurgeon says about it:

“The word *hitherto* seems like a hand pointing toward the past. Whether it has been 20 years or 70” – or however long you have lived – “*Hitherto has the LORD helped us*. Through poverty or wealth, through sickness or health, at home or abroad, on land or sea, in honor or dishonor, in perplexity, joy, trial, triumph, prayer, or temptation” – and we might add, in the midst of a pandemic, social unrest, political polarization, economic distress, moral and spiritual malaise, distrust of government and the press, concerns over the integrity of elections, and the challenges of social distancing – in all these things, “*Hitherto has the LORD helped us*.”

The word *hitherto* simply means “until now” or “up to this time.” Spurgeon compares this life to a long avenue lined with trees, suggesting that as you look down the vista of your years, whether old or young or somewhere in between, you will see “the green boughs of (God’s) mercy overhead and the strong pillars of (His) lovingkindness and faithfulness that bear your joys.” In the trees are birds singing of mercy received *hitherto*.

As you look back on the years of your life – and even on the year 2020, a year that will live in infamy – can you not see how the Lord has helped you and those you love, how the Lord has been gracious to you *thus far*, how He has been with you and shown you His mercy and steadfast love *hitherto*? This does not mean you have not faced challenges or setbacks or disappointments. It does not mean God has not allowed you to experience disruptions of one kind or another. It does mean, though, that the disruptions and hardships of life do not alter the fact of God’s goodness to you, His love for you, and the sufficiency of His grace to you. *Hitherto has the Lord helped us*. He has brought you and me “through many dangers, toils, and snares,” as we sing in “Amazing Grace,” and by His grace He will lead us to our heavenly home.

As you think about the year just ended, or about the whole course of your life so far, let this declaration be the testimony of your life: “*Hitherto – thus far – has the Lord helped us*.” Take time to memorialize the ways in which you have seen God at work, even in the midst of an incredibly trying year.

But that is not all. Spurgeon points out that this phrase points forward as well: “For when a person gets to a certain point and writes *hitherto*,” he says, “he or she is not yet at the end – there is still a distance to be traveled” in life. “More trials and joys, more temptations and triumphs, more prayers and answers, more toil and strength, more (battles) and victories; and then come sickness, old age, disease, death” – things we don’t like to think about and most of us don’t look forward to.

Some of us, it is true, would rather not still be here in the land of the dying. We all live in the land of the dying. The Bible says that death is the destiny of every person (Ecclesiastes 7:2). Sooner or later, unless Jesus returns first, every one of us will have an appointment with death. Some of us, to be honest, are eager for that day to come. We look forward to being absent from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:6-9). Others of us cling to this earthly life with every ounce of strength we have, because we do not want to be separated from those we love here on earth. It doesn’t have to be an either-or. You can love life and look forward to heaven at the same time. You can be eager to go home to heaven and still cherish the goodness and blessings of God in this life.

Spurgeon wants us to see beyond the good things and the hard things of this life, beyond the inevitability of death, to what lies beyond it for those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. What lies ahead? In Spurgeon’s words, “Awakening in the likeness of Jesus; the thrones, harps, songs, psalms, and white garments” of heaven; “the face of Jesus, the society of saints, the glory of God, the fullness of eternity, the infinity of bliss.”

You can be of good courage as you face a new year with all its unknowns and uncertainties, and as you reckon with the finiteness of this life and the certainty of death – whether it will come this year or not for many, many years – and you can raise your Ebenezer, your monument of help (*God’s* help), because, as John Newton wrote:

He who has helped you hitherto
Will help you all your journey through.

“Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” is one of my favorite hymns. It contains these lines:

Hitherto Your love has blest me;
You have brought me to this place;
And I know Your hand will bring me
Safely home by Your good grace.
Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger,
Bought me with His precious blood.
(Robert Robinson, alt. by Margaret Clarkson)

Hitherto is a beautiful word. Let it encourage your heart. Let it fill you with gratitude as you remember the way the Lord has helped you and brought you to this time and place. Let it fill

you as well with assurance, with trust and faith in the Lord for 2021 and beyond, knowing that He will be with you, whatever the future holds, and His grace is sufficient for you.

Hitherto has the Lord helped us. This will never change, because God will never change. His goodness and grace will never change.

Henceforth, may we look to Him, and trust in Him, through all the ups and downs, in all the unknowns and uncertainties of this life.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.