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From Ichabod to Ebenezer

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BY PAUL ANDERSON

FROM ICHABOD TO EBENEZER

THE NOTION OF moving from Ichabod to Ebenezer may produce any of several images in our minds. We may meander mentally from Washington Irving's gangly Ichabod Crane to Charles Dickens's miserly Ebenezer Scrooge enjoying memories of their stories along the way.

It may even produce seasonal associations. Like moving from the harvest season of *Sleepy Hollow's* "headless horseman," rising in his stirrups ready to hurl his head (or was that a pumpkin?) at the poor schoolmaster, to the English Yuletide setting of *A Christmas Carol*.

Another way to approach what it means to move from Ichabod to Ebenezer is to consider what the Bible means when it talks about "Ichabod" and "Ebenezer" in 1 Samuel 4–7. In Hebrew, names of places and individuals are often filled with rich symbolism. "Ichabod" means "no glory," and "Ebenezer" means "stone of help." The events associated with these richly symbolic names begin with the absolute devastation that the pregnant wife of Phineas must have felt when she heard the news that her husband and brother-in-law had been killed in battle, that her father-in-law (Eli) had died upon hearing the news, and that the ark of the covenant had been captured by the Philistines that day. This was the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day of the Bible if there ever was one. In keeping with the events, she was thrown into labor and upon delivery named her son Ichabod, punctuating the sense of loss: "The glory of the Lord has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured." (1 Samuel 4:22)

After seven months the Philistines, tired of their idols being knocked over and tired of suffering plagues and calamity due to the ark's presence within their camp, returned it to the Israelites. For the next 20 years Israel "lamented after the Lord" (1 Samuel 7:2 NRSV) and Samuel called for the house of Israel to return to the Lord with all their hearts,

putting away their idolatrous practices and praying and fasting for forgiveness. The next time the Philistines attacked, the Lord thundered with a mighty voice against them, and they retreated, never again to pose a major problem to Israel the rest of Samuel's life. At this wondrous act of God, Samuel raised a *stone of remembrance* and named it Ebenezer, declaring "Thus far has the Lord helped us." (1 Samuel 7:12)

In the biblical sense, to move from Ichabod to Ebenezer is to trust the Lord through times of loss and calamity, to repent of wayward deeds and attitudes, and to raise a "stone of remembrance" out of gratitude for the Lord's deliverance.

All of us at times experience feelings of desolation or disappointment. Things don't turn out the ways we'd hoped. The approval or affection of those from whom we desire it most evades us. Plans for successful projects or big events fail, or turn out to be only modestly spectacular. God's presence seems unavailable. We experience the departure of the Lord's glory and feel the dread reality of Ichabod.

At times we know what is needed to move back into consolation—restoring the presence of God. What we need then is the Holy Spirit's empowerment. At other times, though, the "dark night of the soul" may have no explicable origin as far as we know, nor can we imagine a justifiable purpose for it. At these times the example of Samuel offers a way forward.

Samuel called for the house of Israel to put away their fertility and prosperity gods and to seek the Lord with their entire selves. It's probably been a long while since any of us have been tempted

to worship Baal or Astarte, but our modern prosperity gods have other names: "Acclaim." "Success." "Power." "Popularity." "Money." "Desirability." "Right." "Pleasure." "Respectability." The list goes on. To put these idols aside and seek the Lord above all else—regardless of outcomes—puts us on the

right path.

The next instruction of Samuel is to fast and pray before the Lord. This is not a transaction: our doing in order to get something from God. It is a further aspect of seeking the Lord purely. With unmixed authenticity. In turn, the Lord routs the Philistines by the thundering of His voice and brings about a harmonious result far more perfect and enduring than anything the use of human force could ever have produced. At this, Samuel raised his stone of remembrance. "Thus far has the Lord helped us!" declared the Ebenezer monument to all passers-by for generations.

THANKSGIVING WILL soon be here. Some of us enter that season from the perspective of victory; some enter it sensing grief. But God and His wondrous might transcend such realities. There is no success so encompassing that we ever outgrow our complete and ongoing dependence on God; there is no loss so devastating that we totally escape the reach of God's healing and consoling love.

In both cases, the willful giving of thanks for God's blessings—known and unrecognized raises a marker of remembrance in our hearts until our lives become living reminders of the Lord's help thus far. It makes all things new and moves us from Ichabod—to Ebenezer. Happy Thanksgiving! **EF**

About this issue: Having combined the last two issues of 1993 into one due to subsidy shortfall, we offer a variety of excellent articles on several themes. Enjoy them fully. (As a reminder: Individual subscriptions will be extended an extra issue.)