

November 13, 2011

## ICHABOD OR EBENEZER?

Jeffery D. Woodhams

I Samuel 7:12-13

Not too many people name their sons “Ichabod.” In fact, I know of only two examples. One is found in the well-known short story “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” by Washington Irving. It’s about a vain but sincere schoolmaster named Ichabod Crane who falls in love with the beautiful heiress Katrina Von Tassel in the quaint Dutch village of Sleepy Hollow. Katrina, however, seems to be using poor Ichabod to stir the jealousy of one Brom Bones, who eventually (it is implied) drives Ichabod out of town by taking on the appearance of the Headless Horseman. It’s a wonderful short story which is associated most often with harvest and autumn.

Ebenezer is no longer a common name as it used to be, and in our modern times we most often associate that name with another well-known literary character, Ebenezer Scrooge, in Charles Dickens’ classic novel, *A Christmas Carol*. Ebenezer Scrooge, as you know, became an avaricious man, bent on hoarding gold at the expense of everything else in his life. Through a series of events in one remarkable night, Scrooge learns that money cannot buy happiness and he becomes compassionate and generous. We hear this tale frequently around Christmas time.

Would it surprise you to know that both of these names are biblical? Probably not. But would it surprise you to learn that they are both from the same book of the Bible? Perhaps, perhaps not. They are both part of the same story in the Bible. There is a progression from Ichabod to Ebenezer.

You see, the people of Israel had gotten comfortable and were not really worshipping God as they ought. There was sin among the priests for one thing, and the two worst violators were the sons of the high priest, who had the responsibility to guide Israel. As you read the first two chapters of I Samuel, you can easily see how the people were divided because of the sin in God’s house. The priests, Hophni and Phinehas, were very selfish. They exercised inappropriate authority over the goods delivered to the church and over many of the women who came to worship, and they themselves refused the authority of High Priest Eli, who was their father. The point is that there was all manner of strife and sin associated with the house of God.

God sent warnings to Eli to get things in order, but Eli had a very passive attitude: “Well, there’s nothing I can do about it. I’ve tried to talk to those boys. I guess God will just have to do whatever He thinks is best.” Eli shrugged it off. Because Eli would not do the hard things necessary to get God’s house in shape, God chose someone else to do His work and receive His blessing: Samuel. Through his own unfaithfulness, Eli lost the blessings that were coming to him!

The story is that one day, foreign invaders known as Philistines came up from the coast of the Mediterranean and made ready to attack Israel. The Israelites gathered an army—and lost four thousand men in a single day. Now, at that point, they asked a very good question: “Why did God allow us to lose this battle? Why didn’t He fight for us?” It was a good question, but they answered it in their own way, according to their own wisdom. They didn’t consult God at all! They came up with their own answer: “Hey, we need to grab the Ark of the Covenant and have the priests carry it into battle with us.

If we have that, then we have God with us and we'll be protected. God will have to protect us if we've got the Ark of the Covenant." So Hophni and Phineas carried the Ark into battle the next day—and the result was an even greater loss. The Israelites lost thirty thousand men, Hophni and Phineas were slain, and the Ark was taken captive by the Philistines.

Word traveled quickly. When Eli heard it, he fell backwards and broke his neck. When Phineas' wife heard it, she went into labor with his last child. The struggle to have that baby was so great, and her grief so intense, that she couldn't even talk throughout the process of labor; but with her final breaths, she gave a name to her newborn son: Ichabod. Ichabod means "the glory has departed." Oh, how true! The glory of the Lord had departed—but not on the battlefield. The glory of the Lord had departed long before, gradually, in stages, as the people and the priests became apathetic about worship, as sin became rampant and unrestrained, as their national unity disintegrated. They had effectively told God over a period of time, "We don't need You right now; we're doing just fine. We want to continue doing what we want to do." And so the glory of the Lord departed.

That reminds me of another well-known Bible story about a man named Samson. God had raised up Samson to be a champion, to give the Israelites relief from their Philistine oppressors; but gradually, over time, Samson traded his spiritual privilege for worldly pleasure, until one day when He needed the strength to fight, and found out too late that the glory of the Lord had departed. Let me read you one verse from that story, just one, Judges 16:20: *"And she said, The Philistines be upon thee, Samson. And he awoke out of his sleep, and said, I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. And he wist not that the LORD was departed from him."* Do you see that? Samson didn't even know the glory of the Lord had departed until it was too late.

One of the wonderful things about God is that He doesn't leave us at Ichabod. God will not stay where He is not wanted, and that is why the glory of the Lord departed; but God will enter any heart and remain among any people who want Him. A few chapters after the Ichabod incident, we find another story. Samuel called together the Israelites for a worship service. He told them to repent of their wrongdoings and call upon God. He promised that God would hear their prayers and return to defend Israel if only they would commit themselves to Him. And you know what? That's exactly what they did! They turned to God in repentance, and they worshipped Him.

So they're out there having a worship service, and the Philistines find out that the Israelites have gathered together. The Philistines assume that this assembly is an act of war, the preparation of an army, and they prepare their own army to attack. The Israelites are terrified. In terms of numbers and military prowess, they are no match for the Philistines.

Samuel was right about God. Since the children of Israel had repented of their sin, and had shown God they were serious about getting their lives right with Him, God defeated the Philistines. At the defeat of the Philistines, Samuel erected a monument and named it Ebenezer. I'm going to read I Samuel 7:12:

<sup>12</sup> *Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer; saying, Hitherto hath the LORD helped us.*

Did you get that? Ebenezer means, Up to this point, the Lord has helped us. This is a wonderful truth: when we do our part, God will do His part. In fact, it is only when we are doing our part that we are in a position to receive the blessings and the help that God desires to give us.

There is a message here for our personal lives, for our families, for our businesses, for our church, and

even for our nation. Friends, which will we choose: Ichabod or Ebenezer? Will we choose to live selfishly, ignoring the work of the Holy Spirit, creating strife and division, causing harm, and generally just living according to our own desires, habits, and attitudes, or will we worship God and bring Him glory by working in unity with the mind and attitude and heart of Jesus Christ? In short, will we put ourselves in the position to receive the blessings and the help that God desires to give us?

Those of you who have come to the last few Homecoming services at this church will remember that we have asked some of the folks who used to serve here as musicians to come back and perform for our Homecoming service. I invited those friends back this year as guests (unfortunately they were unable to come) but not as performers because I want to focus this year on where we are today, November 13, 2011, between the unholy day of Halloween and the holy day of Christmas, between Ichabod and Ebenezer. Which will we choose? I don't mean this to be a choice just for our church, either. It is a choice for every church represented here today. It is a choice for every family here today. It is a choice for every American citizen here today. It is a choice most of all for every individual here today. Will you choose the path of self-destruction, or the path of blessing?

As we examine Scripture, we find many, many examples of both Ichabod and Ebenezer. They're not labeled as such, but they follow the same general pattern. Allow me to map out some of the common elements if I may.

The most common sin in the Bible is the sin of idolatry. In our modern times, we may think that we're safe from that sin. We don't worship little idols. We don't pray to a little stone goddess on our mantle piece, do we? Perhaps not, but idolatry properly defined is more than that. It is putting our trust in anything other than God. We may believe we are safe because we are Americans. Friends, great empires have fallen before! I love America, and I'm as patriotic as they come; and for that very reason, I fear for my country because we have spurned God. We have told God in many ways that He's not welcome here. He's not welcome in most public places anymore. It's even become a source of conflict for private companies and corporations to put "Merry Christmas" on display. Friends, love America, but put your trust in God! We may have our money as a source of security. Oh, friends, money grows wings and flies away! The only thing you can trust money to do is to disappear right when you think you need it most. Another person may have a classic car, and there's nothing wrong with that; but if that person spends Sunday polishing his car rather than worshiping God, he has moved his worship to an idol. That car has become his idol. We may have set your affection on our children to the extent that they interfere with our worship of God. That is, in fact, what the High Priest Eli did in our story today. Children are wonderful, but do not worship them! My point is that anything that we put our trust in, anything that love, can become an idol. Trust in God and God alone!

Another sin that moves people to an Ichabod moment is the sin of division. As you read the book of Exodus, you'll see this a number of times. There was a man named Korah who felt Moses was not a good leader, at least not as good as Korah could have been. Korah began to talk about Moses and denigrate him, and before long he had stirred up a lot of division against Moses. In another instance, Moses' own brother and sister started the same kind of division in the camp of Israel. Those stories didn't end well for the trouble makers. Now, as you read those stories, you'll see that they thought Moses was incompetent or just not a very good leader for various reasons, and it seems that these people who stood up against Moses thought they could do a better job; and maybe they did have some legitimate concerns. But get this—never forget this!—they went about it the wrong way. Instead of talking to Moses, they started talking to everyone else! That gossip, that backbiting, caused great destruction and heartache. Now, friends, if you have a problem with a brother in Christ, what good can you possibly hope to accomplish by talking to someone *else* about it? Let's say I have a problem with

Lydia Ann. I think it's a real problem. I think it needs to be addressed. Now, what good does it do if I go talk to Col. Ben about that problem? What good does it do if I go talk to Rusty about that problem? Can they fix the problem?

Look, friends, people are not piñatas. Preachers are not piñatas. If you break people, candy does not come out. There is nothing good that can come of talking about people behind their backs. The problem that you have with one person cannot be solved by talking to a different person. That is gossip, and it is destructive and divisive.

Another issue that brings about those Ichabod moments is pride. In fact, the very first and greatest example of this occurred in heaven! One of God's greatest angels, Lucifer, got the idea that he could do God's job. There is no question that Lucifer was a very special angel in a high position in heaven. He was beautiful, musical, and intelligent; but all of his talent served to create the idea in him that he could do a better job than God. Contrary to popular depictions, Lucifer is not some kind of a red devil with horns and a tail, nor is he in any way the equal of God Almighty; he only *thinks* he is God's equal! Listen to what Lucifer said in Isaiah 14:12–14: *“How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High.”*

Lucifer's pride was his downfall, but he didn't fall alone. Remember that division that we just talked about? That same thing happened in heaven. Lucifer started talking about God, and as he did, more and more angels began to grumble against God as well. In the end, God had to remove Lucifer and his followers from heaven. Today we know Lucifer by his new name, Satan, which means *adversary*; and the one-third of the angelic host that fell with him are now called demons.

Now, friends, if that sort of thing can happen in heaven, we would be foolish to think that it cannot happen here. It is one thing to recognize flaws in church leaders, because we are all human; but it is another thing entirely to try to seize control or manipulate the church, thinking that you are the only one equipped to handle the church's problems. You may try to exercise control over the finance committee, or you may try to intimidate other church members or the pastor so that you can get what you think is best; but that is not God's way of doing business. It is rooted in pride.

Another common flaw is bad leadership. In the story we read today, the leader, Eli, was too passive. He didn't want to address the problems in God's house. The most he would attempt was to say, “I wish you'd stop doing that.” Even when God sent Eli a message, he wouldn't respond properly. God's nature is such that if Eli had gotten on his knees and prayed, repenting and asking God for the strength to do what needed to be done to correct the problems, the outcome would have been much different for Eli, for his family, and for his nation. I don't believe we would have had this Ichabod moment. Instead, Eli just sort of shrugged and said, “Well, there's just nothing I can do about it.” Bologna!

There's another sort of leader that can destroy a good work—the kind whose ambition leads him to believe that God's house belongs to him. This kind of leader will build himself an empire. Yes, he'll use God's name, but in reality the ministry is all about creating an empire for a man. This kind of man will use force and coercion to gain his own ends. The loyal will be promoted, and the so-called disloyal will be removed by whatever means necessary.

Now, if these are the problems (and there are more), what are the solutions? How can we leave the path that leads to Ichabod and come to the place of Ebenezer, the place of blessing? There is very good news here: God *wants* to bless us! He has revealed in His Word everything we need to know to reach the place of Ebenezer. You see, according to I Timothy 3:16, the Bible is for doctrine [what's right], for reproof [what's wrong], for correction [how to get it right], and for instruction in righteousness [how to keep it right]. That is why I can tell you with assurance that God has clearly marked both paths for us.

The path of blessing is marked first of all by devotion to our Lord God. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. Jesus said that this is the greatest commandment. And the second commandment He states is that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. If we can do those two things, we will be doing all that we need to do to be right with God and man. The prophet Micah in the Old Testament words it slightly differently, but it's from the same God and it's the same message. Listen to Micah 6:8, please:

*<sup>8</sup> He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?*

Now, that is all well and good in theory, but how does it show up in practice? It means that instead of turning to your neighbor and ripping a fellow church member, you will go and talk to that church member. You see, there is room for disagreement in a church, or in a family, or in a business. We aren't all alike, and we don't all think alike, which is good! It's good that we can have different opinions and different viewpoints. It's how we *handle* those things that makes the difference. Gossip and backbiting are unjust and unmerciful activities that contribute to strife and hard feelings. The way of blessing includes handling our differences in love and mercy as men and women of God.

It also means that a good pastor can only lead those who want to be lead. I Peter 5:2-3 give valuable instructions for pastors:

*<sup>2</sup> Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;*

*<sup>3</sup> Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock.*

So the pastor leads and the people follow willingly. The pastor is not a lord over God's heritage, but is an example to the flock. The pastor is not the ruler of an empire, but a shepherd of God's sheep. Yes, there is some authority attached to the position, but it must never be abused. Part of that authority does include addressing problems that arise within the church. On the other hand, if the pastor is passive about problems, as Eli was, they will fester and grow and destroy the ministry. There has to be a sense of balance in that the pastor has some legitimate spiritual authority, but it is only to be used for the good of the church, not to advance his own agenda or to enrich himself. I want you all to understand that is the balance I am trying to achieve. There will be times when problems in the church need to be addressed, and I will attempt to address them appropriately. I want what is best for this church. I want it to exist long after I have moved on in my own career.

The path of blessing, then, is marked by doing justly (that is, being fair in our dealings), loving mercy (giving others the benefit), and walking humbly with our God. That last bit can trip us up, can't it? What a challenge it can be for us to walk humbly! Yet that is exactly what God expects of us. You see, if our heart is already full of ourselves, how can God fill it with His love and His blessings? If our hands are already closed, clenched around the things we think we need, how can God put more into

those hands?

Friends, I believe we are starting to see God's blessing here at Waverly Hall Baptist Church. Shall we continue on that path of blessing? Remember, the name Ebenezer is a place of the start of blessings—the Lord has blessed us up to this point—but I believe there are more in store, many more!

In closing, I have to share one more sober thought with you. Remember that the first battle the Israelites fought in I Samuel in which 4,000 men died? Remember how the next day 30,000 men died, the priests were slain, and the Ark was taken captive? Remember how after the battle, a baby was born and named Ichabod, “the glory of the Lord has departed”? Well, here's the thing: that battlefield had a name. The name...was Ebenezer! At some point earlier in history, God's blessing had rested upon that very place, but they lost the blessing. It would be more accurate to say that they threw it away.

The good news is that God still desired to bless them, and He in fact did bless them, when they chose to follow Him. When they repented, they were finally in a position to receive the blessings that God had for them all along. They moved from Ichabod to Ebenezer.

What will it be for us? Shall we choose to follow God's teaching, to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God? If we do, and I believe we will, we will see yet more blessing. Do right, Waverly Hall Baptist Church! Do right, our friends who are with us today! Do right, keep doing right, and then see what God has in store!