



**Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church**  
Sanford, North Carolina

**Dr. Mark E. Gaskins**  
*Senior Pastor*

**The Lord's Day**  
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**Our Ebenezer**  
**1 Samuel 7:2-14**

How do you bring a pastorate—a ministry to and with a congregation—to an appropriate conclusion?

Endings are as important as beginnings, you know, maybe even more important.

More than once I heard Dr. W. A. Jones, long-time pastor of the Bethany Baptist Church in Brooklyn who is with the Lord now, say that every day he prayed this three-pronged prayer:

Lord, please don't let my body outlast my mind.

Please don't let me outlive all my mourners.

And please don't let me get almost to shore, only to drown in shallow water.

He knew that how you end is just as important as how you begin.

So just how should I conclude these seven years of serving as your shepherd?

***A pastor is a shepherd***

That's how I've approached my ministry through the years, you know. I tried to be clear about that with the search committee when we came, and that's how I've tried to fulfill my responsibilities as your Senior Pastor.

Now I know I haven't pleased everyone all the time, and that there have been times when some of you didn't understand why I did what I did or wouldn't do what I wouldn't do or took the stands that I took. But I learned a long time ago that if I were going to be a shepherd, my larger concern than the satisfaction of the sheep had to be the satisfaction of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

Sometimes shepherds have to do some things the sheep don't understand. The shepherd does those things because he knows they're what the sheep ultimately need.

Sometimes shepherds have to refuse to do some things the sheep would like for them to do, because the shepherds know that to do those things would ultimately do harm to the sheep.

But rest assured—in those times when I've acted or not acted in ways you may not have understood, it has always been out of love and with the best interests of the congregation and its members at heart. I believe that I can say with Paul in Acts 20 that I have not shrunk from declaring to you the whole counsel of God, that I have preached and taught His word faithfully to you, and that I have tried to care for you as God's flock in my charge. I haven't taken this responsibility lightly. I have been far from perfect, but I have sought to be faithful. Where I have been faithful, rejoice with me. Where I have failed you, please forgive me.

### *A mutual conclusion*

This isn't a conclusion just for *me*, though. It's a conclusion for *you*, indeed for *us* as pastor and people. So I suppose it's more appropriate to ask, How should *we* conclude these seven years of ministry together?

You do realize, I hope, that you have blessed me and my family and ministered to us in so many ways.

Through my years as a pastor, I've heard so many horror stories of other ministers who were so unhappy. They were fed up with ministry and their congregations. They didn't want to be pastors anymore, their spouses didn't want to be a minister's spouse anymore, and their children didn't want to be a minister's children anymore. It's heartbreaking to hear their plight and their pain.

Now it hasn't always been a bed of roses here, and sometimes the road has been bumpy. There have been difficult and delicate situations that we've had to work through. But overall, I can honestly say that it's been good to be pastor of Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church.

One reason for this is that while you have respected me as your pastor, you've also understood that I am a person—a person who needs grace and ministry as much as any other person. Your expectations and demands have been high, but not unreasonable. I don't know if I've ever been prayed for more by a congregation than I have here. So many of you have said, "I pray for you every day." And I believe it! That in itself has been more of a ministry than you could ever imagine.

But you haven't just prayed, as vital and important and powerful as that is. You have been there for us when we've needed you.

You'll never know what your kind expressions of sympathy and support have meant to us when we've had deaths in our family—both of Jo Ann's parents, my brother, my father, as well as some extended family.

You'll never know how much the cards and words and other expressions of support, appreciation, and encouragement have meant through the years.

And you'll never know what your support and encouragement for us have meant when we've faced some family challenges. You have rejoiced with us when we've rejoiced and you have wept with us when you knew we were weeping.

And we are grateful. You have blessed us. You have been our church family! Time and time again you have embodied the presence of Christ to us!

For me, this has been an incredible journey! It has been a joy to lead you, to worship with you, to preach to you and teach you, to minister to you in times of need, to share in your joys and sorrows, and you in ours. I have baptized some of you, officiated the weddings for some of you or your children, conducted funeral services for some of your family members, walked through dark valleys with some of you, and worked shoulder to shoulder with you in our common kingdom task.

When my family and I moved here in 2005, Jo Ann and I came with a strong sense of God's hand in the process. After twenty-three and a half years as a local church pastor, God had placed me in a ministry position at one of our North Carolina Baptist schools, Wingate University. That took me by surprise. While I love and am deeply committed to Christian higher education, I was very happy as a local church pastor. I had opportunities to be involved in Christian higher education in a number of ways through the years, and at one point thought I might end up teaching in one of our Baptist schools. But through a long process of prayer, reflection, and

conversations with mentors and colleagues, I had settled into the pastoral role, expecting to be a local church pastor for the rest of my ministry. So moving to a ministry position in an academic setting was something I didn't expect.

But during my time at Wingate, in a role that was very much ministry, but very different from the pastorate, I went through a process of deep soul searching. And every time I looked deep down inside, what I found there was *a pastor*. Yet I knew God had sent us to Wingate. So I wasn't willing to initiate trying to move back toward the pastorate.

But then a couple of church's search committees that someone had mentioned my name to contacted us, and we couldn't help but wonder what God was up to!

And then your search committee contacted us.

I already knew several people from Jonesboro Heights from our time in the Sandy Creek Association when I was pastor of the Sandy Branch Baptist Church from 1988 to 1993. We had a great appreciation for this church and its people from our time there. So the conversation began. I think there was a sense from the beginning on both our part and the committee's part that God was clearly in this process.

Now I have to confess that as I prayed about God's will in our conversation, there were some things that I thought would need to happen to make it possible for us to come to Jonesboro. Some involved matters of conviction, others were very practical—things like timetable, a teaching position for Jo Ann, and other things like that. A really big one was selling our house at Indian Trail and buying a house here. To make a long story short, God provided for them all, sometimes in remarkable ways. And He's kept on doing that.

Throughout these past seven years, we've seen God working among us. Through a process of spiritual discernment, we sought the Holy Spirit's leadership to clarify our vision, mission, and values. More and more we've been striving to plan and work in light of this vision to "embody the presence of Christ to Sanford and the world through our worship, our witness, and our way of life as His disciples." God led us to launch *Mission Jonesboro* to reach out to our surrounding community, and to send David and Heather Webb to India through *City on a Hill Ministries* to share the gospel there.

All along the way we have faced challenges. Not everyone always agreed on what we should do or how we should do it. But once the direction was set, the congregation as a whole has come together to move forward in unity. We've faced some challenges in the area of staffing and finances. But God has always provided, both in terms of people and resources. He's even enabled us to pay off a huge debt in the midst of an awful economy.

Sometimes there have been other challenges as well. But that's the way it seems to happen. When God is at work, it doesn't mean that everything will be easy. Sometimes everything falls into place; sometimes our faith is tested. Whether it's Satan attempting to disrupt the church's unity and fellowship or sidetrack its mission, or whether it's God working circumstances in such a way as to teach us to trust and obey Him no matter what, living and working together as the Lord's church can be very challenging.

But by the grace of God, we have come through it all and met the challenges. Through it all, God has helped us, and is still helping us. As I look back over these past seven years together, my heart is full of thanksgiving. It really is amazing how it all has come about. It has been evident that God has been at work all along!

So how do we bring it all to a close today?

***Raising our Ebenezer***

Maybe we can take a cue from Samuel and the Israelites in today's text.

You remember the story, don't you? The children of Israel had returned to the LORD after a lengthy time of idolatry. Samuel, the prophet-priest-judge, was offering a sacrifice to God and praying for the people at Mizpah. The Philistines heard that the Israelites were gathered there, and attacked them like sitting ducks. The LORD intervened, thundering with a mighty voice and throwing the Philistines into confusion so that the Israelites routed them. Then Samuel did as Jacob had done at Bethel after his dream of the ladder reaching up into heaven, and as Joshua had done after the Israelites crossed over the Jordan on dry ground. He set up a rock as a memorial to God's help. He called it "Ebenezer," meaning "the stone of help," saying, "Thus far the LORD has helped us." As long as it stood, it would serve as a reminder of God's help. Time and time again, they would be able to look to it or remember it, and take courage that *just as God had helped them in the past, He would continue to help them in their present and future needs.*

So maybe the most appropriate way for us to bring our time together as pastor and people to a close is to set up a memorial in our hearts and minds—a remembrance of all God's blessings and mercies and victories during our time together—*our Ebenezer.*

Indeed, God has helped us in so many ways through over 143 years of existence as a church, and especially over these past seven years. And for all His blessings and grace, we are grateful.

So let it be said, and recorded in the annals of eternity, that on this Lord's Day morning, November 18, in the year of our Lord 2012, the members and friends of the Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church of Sanford, North Carolina, raised an Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the LORD has helped us!" And looking to that stone of remembrance, let us all take courage as we follow our Lord fearlessly into the future!

To Him be glory and honor and power and dominion forever and ever! Amen!

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