Israel Recommits to God

Devotional Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:50–58
Background Scripture: 1 Samuel 7
Today's Scripture: 1 Samuel 7:3–11, 15–17

I. First of the Prophets
1 Samuel 7:3–4

3 And Samuel spake unto all the house of Israel, saying, If ye do return unto the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the strange gods and Ashtaroth from among you, and prepare your hearts unto the LORD, and serve him only: and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.

4 Then the children of Israel did put away Baalim and Ashtaroth, and served the LORD only.

3a. The nation had begun to recognize *Samuel* as a prophet. Prophets spoke in the name of God, interpreting dreams, visions, and oracles. The New Testament refers to him as "Samuel the prophet" (Acts 13:20).

In the verse now before us, he emerges as an authoritative spiritual leader for *all . . . Israel*. This is not the first time the people have needed to turn their hearts away from idols and back to *the Lord* (example: Judges 2:10–13). Nor will it be the last time (example: 2 Chronicles 19:4).

The change of allegiance must be directed away from *strange gods* in general and from *Ashtaroth* in particular. The Old Testament markedly intertwines service and worship. To *prepare* for resolute service and unadulterated worship, the people's *hearts* must return to *the Lord*. Right hearts require the active pursuit of holiness. God will restore Israel's sanctity if they confess their wrongdoing, turn from sin, seek forgiveness, and commit to steadfast obedience.

3b. The threat posed by *the Philistines* is the catalyst for the Israelites' crisis of faith. To be in *the hand* of someone or something means to be under their power. God will be the Israelites' protector and deliverer when they live in a covenant relationship with Him.

4. The word *Baalim* is the plural form of *Baal*, the Canaanite god of storms and fertility. *Ashtaroth* is supposedly one of Baal's consorts. These fictitious gods were the "lords" or "masters" of the ancient Near Eastern cultures that populated the region. These ancient populations sought help from these false gods for agricultural abundance, fertility, and success in war.

Samuel's call to *put away* these pagan gods is significant. It represents a deliberate return to wholehearted trust in God by *the children of Israel* for protection, provision, and prosperity.

II. Actions of a Priest
1 Samuel 7:5–9

5 And Samuel said, Gather all Israel to Mizpeh, and I will pray for you unto the LORD.

6 And they gathered together to

Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured it out before the LORD, and fasted on that day, and said there, We have sinned against the LORD. And Samuel judged the children of Israel in Mizpeh.

7 And when the Philistines heard that the children of Israel were gathered together to Mizpeh, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the children of Israel heard it, they were afraid of the Philistines.

8 And the children of Israel said to Samuel, Cease not to cry unto the LORD our God for us, that he will save us out of the hand of the Philistines.

9 And Samuel took a sucking lamb, and offered it for a burnt offering wholly unto the LORD: and Samuel cried unto the LORD for Israel; and the LORD heard him.

5. In response to the people's return to the Lord, Samuel calls for a large-scale gathering at *Mizpeh*, located just a few miles north of his home in Ramah. There are multiple towns named "Mizpeh," but this specific one is situated in the mountainous territory inherited by the tribe of Benjamin.

The prayer Samuel intends to offer is intercession. Intercessors mediate between two parties; in this case, Samuel arbitrates between *the Lord* and *all* the people of *Israel*. Samuel serves the people by helping to reconcile their fractured relationship with God. Samuel is later recognized, along with Moses, as one of Israel's greatest intercessors (Psalm 99:6; Jeremiah 15:1).

6. The Israelites begin a series of actions, obeying Samuel's instructions. First, the people gather at *Mizpeh*, the first gathering of its kind in more than two hundred years. The assembly signifies a reconnection of Israel as a whole, rather than as fragmented tribal entities.

Second, they use *water* as a symbol of their repentance and cleansing *before the Lord*. Third and fourth, the people fast and confess their sins. Fasting involves abstaining from food or drink to focus on spiritual matters.

This verse describes the first time Samuel plays the role of judge for *the children of Israel*. A form of the Hebrew word translated as *judged* is found throughout the book of Judges to depict leaders and their actions. This is the first time that the word applies to Samuel.

7. The *children of Israel* find themselves in a vulnerable position. Their gathering at *Mizpeh* is highly visible to their long-standing enemy. Word of an Israelite assembly reaches *the lords of the Philistines*, a group that likely includes the leaders of the five key Philistine cities listed in Joshua 13:3.

It was common in the ancient Near East for religious gatherings to precede battles, allowing leaders to request favor from their deities. Because Israel has assembled on a day unaffiliated with a known holiday or festival, the gathering alarms the Philistines. They assume the gathering is a precursor to war and, therefore, launch a direct assault *against Israel*.

8. In response to their fear, *the children of Israel* turn to their leader. They fervently ask *Samuel* to intercede on their behalf, hoping his prayers will initiate their deliverance. Since the Israelites' gathering is not for battle, they are wholly unprepared. Rather than feeling strong and fortified, the people are weak from fasting and repentance. This time, they appropriately place their faith in *God* to *save* them.

9. *Samuel* responds by making *a burnt offering* to cleanse the people of their guilt and to mediate their prayers as a pleasing aroma to *the Lord*. The phrase *sucking lamb* means "lamb of milk" in Hebrew, indicating that the lamb is still quite

young. A lamb could be sacrificed after it was at least seven days old.

III. Last of the Judges
1 Samuel 7:10–11, 15–17

10 And as Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel: but the LORD thundered with a great thunder on that day upon the Philistines, and discomfited them; and they were smitten before Israel.

11 And the men of Israel went out of Mizpeh, and pursued the Philistines, and smote them, until they came under Bethcar.

15 And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life.

16 And he went from year to year in circuit to Bethel, and Gilgal, and Mizpeh, and judged Israel in all those places.

17 And his return was to Ramah; for there was his house; and there he judged Israel; and there he built an altar unto the LORD.

10. Concurrent with Samuel's *burnt offering* and the Philistines' advance *against Israel*, the Lord responds. We do not know whether God speaks in an audible voice that sounds like *thunder*, or if He sends a powerful weather system at just the right moment. Writers of the Old Testament often describe the voice of God as sounding like thunder (2 Samuel 22:14; Job 37:4–5; Psalm 29:3; etc.).

The Lord demonstrates His power in a way that *the Philistines* might expect from Baal, the false god of storms. However, this *great* thunder alarms the Philistines and throws them into a panic.

11. In the last recorded battle between the Israelites and the Philistines, the Israelites fled after the capture of the ark (1 Samuel 4:1). On this occasion, however, *the men of Israel* chase down the army of *the Philistines*. Israel's fighting men begin pursuit in *Mizpeh*, where they had gathered with Samuel. This is the only mention of *Bethcar* in Scripture, and its exact location is unknown; however, some commentators believe it is situated west of Mizpeh.

15. The Israelites achieve such a victory that the Philistines cease invading. The end of conflict brings relief for other groups in neighboring territories and, therefore, establishes peace in the land.

The conclusion of this narrative section summarizes Samuel's faithful service. He has already been recognized as a prophet of Israel (1 Samuel 3:20). This section identifies him as a leader similar to Eli and other judges of Israel.

Instead of specifying a particular time frame, this verse emphasizes Samuel's complete devotion—he serves *Israel* and God, *all the days of his life*.

16. Samuel leads differently than his predecessor, Eli. Instead of remaining in one location and requiring the people to come to him as Eli did in Shiloh, Samuel travels. His influence is not confined to a single city or site. His circuit, which starts from his home in Ramah and extends to three other cities, spans approximately thirty miles. The towns of *Bethel* and *Mizpeh* are likely located north of Ramah in Ephraim. There is more than one town named *Gilgal* in the Old Testament. The one mentioned here is probably located in the Jordan River valley near Jericho.

17. Although Samuel travels, he makes his home in *Ramah*, the place of his birth. With Eli's passing and the ark's new residence in Kirjathjearim, Samuel has no reason to remain in Shiloh. This suggests that Shiloh had been destroyed in war. So, Samuel establishes a new place of worship near his home.

Involvement Learning

Israel Recommits to God

Into the Lesson

Think about a significant turning point in your life. What led up to this pivot?

How did this change affect you or your relationship with God?

Into the Word

Read 1 Samuel 7:3–6. How did the Israelites' actions show that they were serious about turning back to God?

Read 1 Samuel 7:7–11. What were the Israelites' fears?

How did Samuel respond to their fears?

Read 1 Samuel 7:15–17. How did Samuel fulfill the roles of prophet and judge?

What qualities of Samuel's leadership are evident in his words and actions?

How did Samuel guide the Israelites toward repentance and renewal?

What key principles of godly leadership does Samuel showcase?

Key Text

Samuel judged Israel
all the days of his life.
—1 Samuel 7:15

Into Life

Nation / Community / Local Congregation

Choose one of the above groups and write a short prayer of intercession, asking for God's favor and deliverance for that group.

Thought to Remember

God requires wholehearted allegiance.