

SPIRITUAL REVIVAL AT MIZPAH

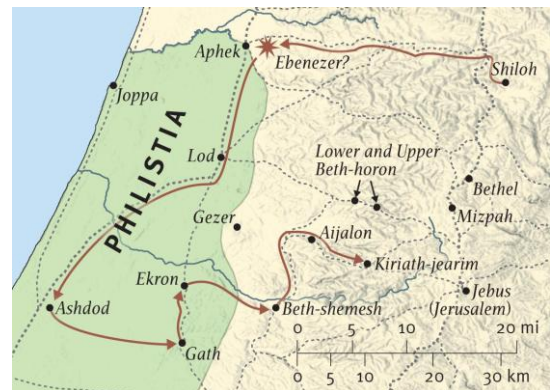
1 Samuel 7:2-17

Key Verse: 7:3

And Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines."

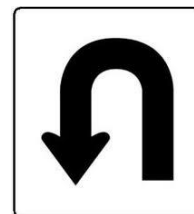
The revival at Mizpah was a turning point in Israel's history. Let us review the events leading up to this revival. The Israelites had been sinning greatly before God. They had no respect for God and his word. Everyone did as he saw fit. Even the priests in the house of God did not heed the word of God. Eli's two sons took advantage of their positions as priests to satisfy their sins of lust, possessions and power (2:12-25). And Eli failed to help them to repent their sins. God punished his people by allowing the Philistines to defeat them; 4,000 men were killed in the battle near Ebenezer (4:2). The Israelites were shocked by the defeat, but they did not repent. They did not come to God. Instead, they attributed their defeat to not having the ark of God in the battlefield. They had Eli's two sons carry the ark in the next battle against the Philistines. They thought they would win magically if they had the ark in front of them. But this time, 30,000 soldiers were killed and the ark was taken by their enemy. Eli's sons were killed and upon hearing the news of the defeat Eli fell backward and died. His daughter-in-law also died while giving birth to her son. She named the boy "Ichabod" saying, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured" (4:22).

The Philistines put the ark of God in their temple, displaying it like a trophy. But God showed them there is only one true God. His hand was heavy on them, killing their people through the terrible plagues in the cities where the ark was moved to. Finally they decided to return the ark to Israel. The Israelites were happy to see the ark returned to them, but when some men of Beth Shemesh showed disrespect toward God and his word by looking into the ark, the Lord struck them down, killing 70 of them. The people mourned because of the heavy blow the Lord had dealt them. They asked, "Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God? To whom will the ark go up from here?" So the ark was moved to Kiriath Jearim. Look at verse 2. *It was a long time, twenty years in all, that the ark remained at Kiriath Jearim, and all the people of Israel mourned and sought after the Lord.* The Israelites' attitude towards the Lord began to change. The disasters and defeats served as a wake-up call to them. For 20 years, they mourned and sought after the Lord.



In this situation, how did Samuel serve the Lord? He faithfully taught the word of God (4:1). But in this passage, he did something more dramatic to help them to repent their sins and turn to God.

First, “Get rid of the foreign gods and serve the Lord only” (3-4). Look at verse 3. *And Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, “If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.”* Samuel challenged the Israelites to get rid of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths. First, he said, “If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts,” Samuel knew that they were remorseful about their sins. They mourned for the past 20 years. But apparently, there was no real change in their hearts. They had no real repentance. They had no U-turn in their spiritual life. They still worshiped the Canaanite gods. Baal was the god of agriculture. They worshiped Baal for their material well-being. Ashtoreth was a goddess of love and sex. They worshiped her for pleasure and fertility. They worshiped these idols even as they felt sorry for what they had done to bring God’s wrath upon them. Samuel challenged them to return to God with all their hearts. Their hearts had been divided between God and the idols, between God and material things of the world. He challenged them to make a real change in their hearts, not just a cosmetic change or window dressing. He told them to get rid of the idols. He challenged them to repent their idol worship. He also challenged them to commit themselves fully to the Lord and serve him only. Samuel also promised them that, if and when they repented their idolatry and served the Lord only, God would deliver them from the hand of the Philistines. He made it clear to them that God was using the Philistines as his instrument to help them to turn their hearts around.



How did the Israelites respond? *So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the Lord only (4).* Their repentance was real this time. They put away the images of the idols. They probably smashed them and threw them away in the trash, as one young man I know smashed all his cherished rock music CDs when he met Jesus personally. The Israelites then turned their attention to the word of God. They began to meditate on the word of God and struggled to obey the word. They did things to serve the Lord. They worshiped the Lord only.

We also live in an idol-worshipping culture. Many people worship the modern-day Baals and Ashtoreths. Materialism and hedonism dominate their way of living. Just turn on the TV, open your web browser or newspaper to notice how we are bombarded by advertisements for things that catch our eyes. New car models are usually introduced with the pictures of bikini-clad models. Beer commercials also include gorgeous, half-naked women. I failed to see the connection between cars, beer and pretty women. But anyway, they are unavoidable. In this situation, it is easy for our hearts to be divided between God and this world. But our hearts should not be divided (Lk 16:13). We should not worship the counterfeit gods. If Samuel was with us today, he would say to us, “If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then get rid of these idols, commit yourselves fully to the Lord and serve him only!”

Second, a national prayer meeting at Mizpah (5-8). How did Samuel lead the Israelites to true repentance on a national level? Look at verse 5. *Then Samuel said, "Assemble all Israel at Mizpah and I will intercede with the Lord for you."* Samuel told them to assemble at Mizpah. The purpose of the gathering was to pray to God. It was a large prayer meeting. Mizpah was located on the mountainous area north of Jerusalem. I am not sure why Samuel picked the location. Perhaps he anticipated that the Philistines would attack them and wanted his people to be in a strategic position for a military operation (Mizpah in Hebrew means "look-out" or "watchtower"). One thing we do know is that it was not easy for the people of Israel to assemble there. They had to climb the rugged mountain.

It is not easy for us to get together to pray as a group, especially for our early morning prayer meetings. We seem to have many obstacles to overcome such as distance, work schedules, children, lack of motivation, and so on. It is not easy to get up early in the morning after having a hard day at work. But our Lord promises that he will be with us when two or three of us gather in his name (Mt 18:20). Even our Lord Jesus got up early in the morning to pray after a hard day of work (Mk 1:35). May God help us to pray together!

The prayer meeting at Mizpah was not an ordinary, habitual kind. Look at verse 6. *When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, "We have sinned against the Lord." And Samuel was leader of Israel at Mizpah.* In their gathering, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord. We are not sure about the meaning of this. But it was difficult for them to draw water on a desert mountain. As they poured the water out before the Lord, they probably poured out their hearts to the Lord in their prayer. It was a sincere prayer. It was also a repentant prayer. They consecrated themselves by fasting. And they confessed their sins saying, "We have sinned against the Lord." We know that God never ignores our sincere and repentant prayer. Jesus told us that we should fast when the bridegroom is away from us (Mk 2:20). May God help us consecrate ourselves to pray, especially when we feel the Lord seems to be far away! May God help us to offer our sincere and repentant prayers to the Lord!

How did the Philistine rulers respond to Israel's assembly? They came up to Mizpah to attack the Israelites. They thought they could easily defeat the Israelites as they had done before. When the Israelites heard of it, they became afraid. The death of the 34,000 of their sons was still fresh in their memory. They were afraid of the Philistines. In this desperate situation, what did the Israelites do? This time, they did not become superstitious. They turned to God. Look at verse 8. *They said to Samuel, "Do not stop crying out to the Lord our God for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines."* They asked Samuel to continue to pray for them to God so that God might rescue them. This time, they depended on God. They had changed.

Third, Ebenezer (9-14). How did Samuel intercede with the Lord for the Israelites? Look at verse 9. *Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. He cried out to the Lord on Israel's behalf, and the Lord answered him.* Samuel offered a burnt offering to the Lord. He cried out to the Lord on Israel's behalf. He took a suckling lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. This symbolized offering of an entire self, mind, heart and body. It was a whole-hearted dedication. Our worship and prayer must be whole-hearted.



How did God answer the whole-hearted prayer and offering? *While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle. But that day the Lord thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites. The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth Car (10-11).* This time, God was on the side of his people. He raised his hand against the Philistines. They were routed before the Israelites. The men of Israel pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth Car.

After the victory how did Samuel help them commemorate the event? Look at verse 12. *Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far has the Lord helped us."* Samuel helped the Israelites to commemorate the victory at Mizpah by setting up a stone between Mizpah and Shen. He named it "Ebenezer" saying, "Thus far has the Lord helped us." Ebenezer means "stone of the help." Samuel helped them to remember how God helped them to defeat the scary army of the Philistines when they cried out to him.

The stone that Samuel set up was a milestone. Nationally, Israel had been in the period of Ichabod. But now they entered the period of Ebenezer through their spiritual revival at Mizpah. *So the Philistines were subdued and did not invade Israelite territory again. Throughout Samuel's lifetime, the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines. The towns from Ekron to Gath that the Philistines had captured from Israel were restored to her, and Israel delivered the neighboring territory from the power of the Philistines. And there was peace between Israel and the Amorites (13-14).* When they turned to God and he was with them, they had peace. Let us also turn to God for his help. Let us depend on God for everything. Let us pray that we may be in Ebenezer. And when we experience the grace of God, let us remember his grace by setting up a stone of commemoration. How can we

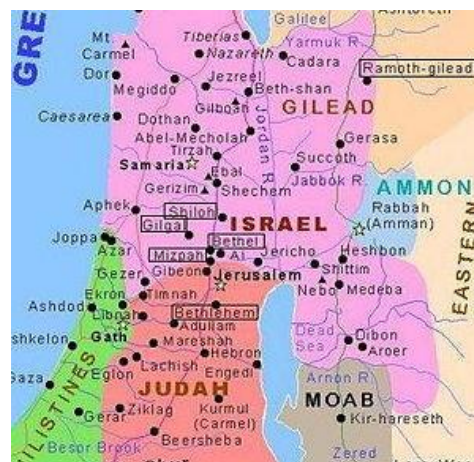


set up our own Ebenezer? Perhaps we can plant a tree as Abraham did. We can get a tattoo. I think the best Ebenezer we can set up is in our hearts. Many of our coworkers remember certain Bible key verses to mark the turning points in their lives. Ms. Deborah always remembers Romans 1:5. Her life was turned around when God helped her to accept the grace and apostleship through the blood of Jesus.

Fourth, Samuel continued as judge over Israel all the days of his life (15-17). *Samuel continued as judge over Israel all the days of his life. From year to year he went on a circuit from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah, judging Israel in all those places (15-16).* How did Samuel continue to serve the Lord after the revival at Mizpah? He continued as judge over Israel all his life. He traveled to Bethel, Gilgal and Mizpah each year, judging Israel in those cities. What does it mean he went on a circuit? In the U.S. judicial history, the Supreme Court Justices used to “ride the circuit,” meaning they traveled to different cities to hold their court sessions. This was time consuming, physically demanding and even dangerous. This practice was discontinued in 1911, but we still hear about the term “circuit courts” today. For example, the state of Pennsylvania is part of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit. It would’ve been much easier for Samuel to hold his courts in his home town of Ramah. But Samuel did not choose the easy way. He did not wait for the people come to him; he went to them! He had no SUV or motorcycle. He probably rode on a donkey or walked on foot through the rugged terrain. He reached out to people to help them as their judge.



So what did it mean to be Israel’s judge? From the conquest of Canaan by Joshua until the first kingdom of Israel (ca. 1150-1025 BCE), the Israelites formed a loose confederation of 12 tribes. No central government existed, and in times of crisis the people were led by *ad hoc* leaders known as judges. The judges often acted as military leaders in times of trial (Jdg 2:16). More importantly they were spiritual leaders who led the people to God (Jdg 2:17). They were shepherds for the people of God. Samuel as the judge was first and foremost a Bible teacher for his people (3:19-21; 4:1).



Look at verse 17. *But he always went back to Ramah, where his home was, and there he also judged Israel. And he built an altar there to the Lord.* Samuel was on the road a lot. But he always returned to his home base in Ramah. There he built an altar to the Lord. What did this mean? The altar was a place where the people of God could come to God and pray to him and offer their sacrifices. Samuel built an altar to the Lord. It means he prayed to God for his people. We can also build an altar to the Lord. We don’t need many stones to build our altar. We can use our bended knees to build our altar—an altar of prayer. We can talk to God. We can listen to him. Sometimes, we feel helpless to do anything for young people and for our coworkers. But there is always one thing we can do—we can pray for them.

In today's passage, we learned how Samuel helped his people to repent their sins of idolatry and serve the Lord with a full commitment. He helped them to experience the spiritual revival at Mizpah. Then Samuel continued to serve the Lord as a traveling Bible teacher. May God help us to experience a spiritual revival in our life through our repentance! May God use us as his servants as we share the word of God with young people of our time!