

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”  
Matthew 6:33 (NIV)

**I. 1 Samuel 7: 3 – 6, about repentance in Israel**

**a. Verse 4:2 finished the “ark narrative”; what does that verse tell us about the timing of the events described in verses 3 – 6?**

The timing of the events is confusing and scholars' opinions differ. The 20 years that verse two says the ark remained in Kiriath Jearim isn't long enough to account for all of the events (including Saul's entire reign, see 1 Samuel 13:1) occurring before David brought the ark to Jerusalem. That suggests that 20 years refers to time between the end of the ark narrative and our passage about Samuel and the Battle of Mizpah.<sup>1</sup> If that's correct, it's during this time that the worship of Philistine and Canaanite Gods and idols intruded into the faith of God's chosen people.

**b. What's happened to the faith of the people of Israel?**

Against the background, we see a story of repentance in Israel. Since the events in the ark narrative, the people had turned to other Gods (Ashtoreths – note plural in NIV). Now Samuel reappears in the narrative; we haven't seen or heard of him since verse 4:1. He's now in his mature ministry as a prophet of God and leader (Judge) of Israel (vs. 7:5).

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Henry points out that the Septuagint is somewhat clearer on this timing; “and it was twenty years, [when] the whole house of Israel looked up again after the Lord.” See, Henry, Matthew *A Commentary on the Whole Bible*, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/1-samuel/7.html?p=3>

**c. How does Samuel's respond? Why is the sequence of events important?**

We're not directly told what Samuel had been doing in this interim. But there are strong indications. Recall 1 Samuel 3:20 – 4:1 following God's calling of the young Samuel. "And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD. The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word. And Samuel's word came to all Israel." The opening phrase "Then all the people of Israel turned back to the LORD" (vs. 7:2) suggests this is the fruit of Samuel's ministry during this time.

**d. What are the two most important points of Samuel's preaching to the people?**

Samuel's first purpose is to separate the people from their idols. His preaching emphasizes that "returning to the LORD with all your hearts" requires ridding themselves of the "foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the LORD and serve him only . . ." (vs. 7:3). As Matthew Henry puts it, "He endeavored to separate between them and their idols, for *there* reformation must begin."<sup>2</sup>

**Suggestion for leaders:** The seductive and malevolent temptation of idols is a theme that recurs throughout scripture so frequently it becomes almost tiresome to read about. Samuel, like Jacob (Gen. 35:2, 4) and Joshua (Joshua 24:14, 23), preached against this sin. A reader wonders, "why do God's people never learn"? Questions for your group to discuss might be: Do we ever learn? Have we learned today? Why not, is something wrong with us?

Samuel's second point is "serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines" (vs. 7:2). God is sovereign. We usually expect a sovereign government to serve and care for its citizens, but not for the citizens of another nation. Why should God care and provide for those who reject his sovereignty? Only after the people had purged their idols and "served the LORD alone" did Samuel call them to Mizpah. Only after they confessed, "We have sinned against the LORD" would he intercede with the Lord on their behalf. This ceremony of pouring out water before the Lord is nowhere else described exactly like this in the Old Testament. It may symbolize the cleansing brought about by confession of sin.

The sequence of events is: Repentance ⇒ Confession ⇒ Recommitment

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<sup>2</sup> Henry, *ibid.*

## II. 1 Samuel 7: 7 – 11, the Battle of Mizpah

### a. Why do the Philistines attack now?

The Philistines had dominated Israel since defeating them 20 years earlier. They seem to have misinterpreted the purpose of this national gathering of Israel. They understandably saw it as a threat to their rule and reacted accordingly, mobilizing a pre-emptive attack.

### b. Why did the Israelites fear?

The Israelites were fearful because the Philistines had soundly defeated them before. The last time they fought the Philistines, 30,000 Israelites died (1 Samuel 4:10). Further, they had come to Mizpah to worship, not to fight. Samuel's call wasn't a battle call. So it's unlikely they brought weapons of war with them. In effect, they would be helpless before the well-armed Philistines. Even if the Israelites had come prepared for war, they would be at a major disadvantage against the Philistine's superior weapons. See 1 Samuel 13:19. They had good reason to fear.

### c. Who wins the battle?

The "battle" is not much of a battle at all. It's God, not the Israelites, who defeats the Philistines. The Lord confounds the Philistines by "thundering" so as to break up their attack and send them into retreat. The Israelites pursue the confused Philistines and inflict casualties, but the Philistines have already lost. Remember Hannah's prayer in Chapter 2:9-10:

"It is not by strength that one prevails;  
those who oppose the LORD will be broken.  
The Most High will thunder from heaven;  
the LORD will judge the ends of the earth."

● ● ●  
"Mizpah" means "watchtower." Mizpah was also the name of five or six Old Testament sites. This is Mizpah of Benjamin, a town located between Ramah and Bethel, about 14 miles south and west of Shiloh, near the northern border of the tribe of Judah. This was the place where Jacob separated from Laban (Genesis 31:49), and was the gathering place for a repentant Israel in Judges 20:1. This was a place remembered for separation and repentance.

● ● ●  
**Thunder**  
Thunder was regarded as the voice of Yahweh. "After that comes the sound of his roar; he thunders with his majestic voice." (Job 37:4). When God spoke to Jesus, "the crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered . . ." (John 12:29). Scripture often uses thunder as an indication of the power of God and His might. "Who then can understand the thunder of his power?" (Job 26:14). "The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord thunders over the mighty waters". (Ps 29:3). Since thunder is very common in the winter storms of Syria and Palestine, it seems unlikely that ordinary thunder would spread fear among the Philistines, so the thunder described here must have been something extraordinary and not otherwise describable.

**d. What is the key to this victory?**

The battle compares the effectiveness of the God of Israel with the gods of the Philistines—from whom the Israelites have just turned away. It's similar to the comparison of the God of Israel with the principal God of the Philistines, Dagon, in 1 Samuel 5:1-5. That first time, the point was made to the Philistines, this time directly to the Israelites. The incident validates the choice recounted in verse 4 to follow the true God under the guidance of God's Prophet and Judge—Samuel. This is the key to the victory. Note that the prophesy in verse 3, “serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines” is entirely fulfilled, confirming Samuel is a prophet of God.

The story is a lesson about getting our priorities straight. Samuel did not send the Israelite army out to meet the approaching enemy. Instead, he carried on worshipping God. At this moment of great crisis, he trusted God. Following his example, so too did the people: “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.’” (See vs. 8.)

**III. 1 Samuel 7:12**

**a. What is the symbolism of the stone?**

Ebenezer means “the stone of [divine] help.” It's an acknowledgment that the victory was attributable to God and a confession of faith and trust in God. Without God's help, the victory would have been impossible. The Israelites know that. That's why they feared the Philistines before the battle.

- b.** The location of both Beth Kar in verse 11 and Shen in verse 12 are disputed. Most commentators treat them as unknown. That means that the location of the stone of Ebenezer is also is unknown. The only thing that seems likely is that this is a location different from the Ebenezer of 4:1 and 5:1, which is too far northwest from Mizpah to be the same place. Still, the narrator intentionally contrasts the two Ebenezer incidents. All that was lost through sin in the first is restored in the second.

c. **Do you think the people of God have learned God's lesson? (Hint, peek at next week's passage.)**

This passage about trusting God and his prophet stands in stark contrast with the immediately following event, the people's demand for a King (next week's passage). The literary structure of chapters 4, 5, 6 (the "ark narrative)," and 7 (the Battle of Mizpah) intends to show us, the readers, that God is true to his covenant even when his people of Israel are not. When the Israelites are true to their part of the covenant, the Lord will protect them and keep them safe. The fact that they immediately seek to find their future security in a King, demonstrates that they haven't truly learned.

**Suggestion for leaders:** be careful not to steal next week's lesson. Pass over this point lightly if you can and recall it next week. Never the less, part of the purpose of this story of victory granted by God to those who trusted God's leadership is to contrast it with the people's desire for a King in Chapter 8.

#### IV. 1 Samuel 7:6 and 13 – 17

##### a. From this point on, what's Samuel's role in Israel and how does he fulfill it?

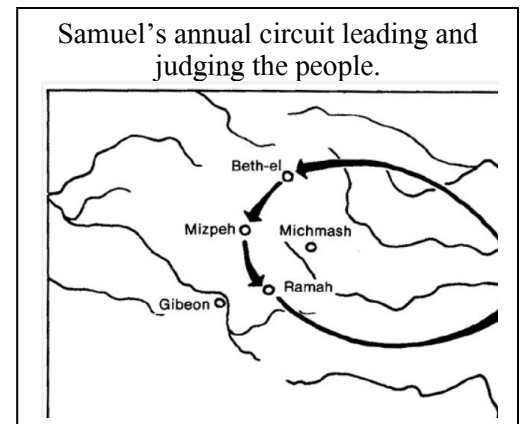
Samuel is the last person in the Old Testament designated as a Judge of Israel. Note that in verses 6 and 15 the NIV and NASB use different words to describe Samuel's role in Israel. The former uses the word "leader"; the latter says "judge." In this context, they mean the same thing.

The judges were temporary and special deliverers, sent by God to deliver the Israelites from their oppressors. Their first work often included that of deliverers and leaders in war. They then administered justice to the people, and their authority substituted for the lack of a regular government. The administration of Samuel gave Israel something like a settled government. Samuel, as judge and leader of Israel:

- Secured peace - v. 13
- Restored Israel's rights - v. 14
- Administered justice - vss. 15-16
- Kept the public exercise of religion - v. 17

Concerning this last point, centuries later, Israel remembered Samuel's judgeship as a time of faithful observance of God's laws:

"The Passover had not been observed like this in Israel since the days of the prophet Samuel . . ."  
Chronicles 35:18 (NIV)



Thus, we can extend the sequence of events to:

Repentance ⇒ Confession ⇒ Recommitment ⇒ Blessing

## V. Summary

### a. Samuel sought “first his kingdom and his righteousness” as Jesus taught in Matthew 6:33. How did it work out for him?

Samuel’s life isn’t one of comfort and luxury enjoying gifts from heaven. Instead, it’s one of service, duty, and responsibility. For “all the days of his life,” he judged Israel, riding an arduous annual circuit leading and judging the people. He fulfilled his responsibilities as a priest by building an altar. His home in Ramah seems to have become a proxy for Shiloh, the religious center destroyed by the Philistines following the Israelites defeat 20 years earlier. Later in this book, we’ll see him carrying out other tasks, sometimes reluctantly, assigned to him by God.

### b. How might it work out for us?

If Samuel’s reward is greater duties and responsibilities, should we expect something different? There are indeed great blessings in serving the Lord, but we shouldn’t expect that service to be without challenges.

Consider Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians:

“I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms . . .” Ephesians 1:18-20 (NIV).