

Israel Returns to the Lord Under Samuel's Leadership

1 Samuel 7

¹ Samuel 7 – “Then the men of Kirjath Jearim came and took the ark of the LORD, and brought it into the house of Abinadab on the hill, and consecrated Eleazar his son to keep the ark of the LORD. ² So it was that the ark remained in Kirjath Jearim a long time; it was there twenty years. And all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD.

³ Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, “If you return to the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from among you, and prepare your hearts for the LORD, and serve Him only; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines.” ⁴ So the children of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtoreths and served the LORD only.

⁵ And Samuel said, “Gather all Israel to Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you.” ⁶ So they gathered together at Mizpah, drew water, and poured it out before the LORD. And they fasted that day, and said there, “We have sinned against the LORD.” And Samuel judged the children of Israel at Mizpah.

⁷ Now when the Philistines heard that the children of Israel had gathered together at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the children of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines. ⁸ So the children of Israel said to Samuel, “Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us, that He may save us from the hand of the Philistines.”

⁹ And Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. Then Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him. ¹⁰ Now as Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel. But the LORD thundered with a loud thunder upon the Philistines that day, and so confused them that they were overcome before Israel. ¹¹ And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and drove them back as far as below Beth Car. ¹² Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen, and called its name Ebenezer, saying, “Thus far the LORD has helped us.”

¹³ So the Philistines were subdued, and they did not come anymore into the territory of Israel. And the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. ¹⁴ Then the cities which the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath; and Israel recovered its territory from the hands of the Philistines. Also there was peace between Israel and the Amorites.

¹⁵ And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. ¹⁶ He went from year to year on a circuit to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah, and judged Israel in all those places. ¹⁷ But he always returned to Ramah, for his home was there. There he judged Israel, and there he built an altar to the LORD.”

Background Notes

After the Ark of the Covenant came back from the land of Philistines, it was brought to the town of Kirjath Jearim. It remained there in the house of Abinadab for at least 100 years. The obvious question that comes to mind at this point is,

“Why wasn’t the Ark brought back to Shiloh?” Before the Philistines captured it, the Ark was in the Tabernacle at Shiloh. Most likely the answer is that the Philistines overran and destroyed Shiloh soon after the Ark was captured. Shiloh was not far from where the battle took place. Jeremiah 26:4-6 supports this scenario. *“And you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the LORD: “If you will not listen to Me, to walk in My law which I have set before you, to heed the words of My servants the prophets whom I sent to you, both rising up early and sending them (but you have not heeded), then I will make this house like Shiloh, and will make this city a curse to all the nations of the earth.”* That text certainly supports the idea that Shiloh was destroyed, and it seems that this may have happened when the Philistines took the Ark.

The Tabernacle and its furnishings must have been rescued and removed from Shiloh, because it was set up at Nob during Saul’s reign, and at Gibeon during the reigns of David and Solomon, before the Temple was built in Jerusalem. Furthermore, Samuel didn’t live at Shiloh, but in Ramah (v17). He became a circuit-riding judge for Israel, and he judged Israel for the rest of his days. His center of operations was not in Shiloh, but in Ramah where he now lived. Samuel built an altar in Ramah, which would have been highly unlikely if the Tabernacle were still at Shiloh. One further point that supports the thought that the Philistines destroyed Shiloh is the discovery of a destruction layer in the archeological ruins at Shiloh that dates to the same time as the battle of Aphek and Ebenezer.

The Ark of the Covenant was in Kirjath Jearim during the revival of 1 Samuel 7 and it remained in Kirjath Jearim until the time of David, when the Ark was finally brought up to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6). So, the Ark of the Covenant was located in Kirjath Jearim for at least 100 years in the house of Abinadab.

Doctrinal Points

1. God gives victory to His people when they return to Him.

Verse 2 says that Israel lamented after the Lord -- that is, they sought after the Lord for blessing, and mourned the fact that the Lord was not blessing them. But one key ingredient was missing before revival could come. Verse 3 tells us that the Israelites still possessed a lot of idols! Is that possibly a problem in our lives as well? We ask for the Lord’s blessing and for revival in our lives, but we still have our idols, the things that come between us and our full commitment and worship of the Lord. No wonder we experience defeat! The idols must go; we can’t experience victory until we turn fully to the Lord.

Samuel had now grown to manhood, and he challenged the people to get rid of their idols so that deliverance and blessing could come from the Lord. The people responded in a positive way. They got rid of their idols, and then they gathered at Mizpah and poured water out before the Lord as a symbolic gesture of full repentance. They fasted and they let Samuel judge them. *“So they gathered together at Mizpah, drew water, and poured it out before the LORD. And they fasted that day, and said there, “We have sinned against the LORD.” And Samuel judged the children of Israel at Mizpah”* (v6).

When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled together at Mizpah, they probably suspected a war council, and so they came up to attack Israel. But Israel had returned to the Lord, and they looked to the Lord to deliver them. They asked Samuel to pray continually for them, and the Lord answered. After Samuel offered a sacrifice to the Lord, the Lord answered with great thunder that confused the Philistines, and they were defeated. God gave Israel a great victory!

A significant aspect in this victory is that Baal, one of the foreign gods that Israel removed, was thought to be the god who controlled the thunder! Where was Baal's power over the thunder in this event? It wasn't by chance that the God of Israel used thunder to defeat the Philistines – this showed His power over the foreign gods, and it certainly proved to both Israel and the Philistines that the foreign gods were powerless before the God of Israel! And we should remember that there was real demonic power behind these pagan gods, these idols of Baal and Ashtoreth. They weren't just wood and stone images – but the demonic power behind the images was powerless before the Lord God of Israel!

How many times did the Philistines have to learn this lesson, after their experience when their god, Dagon, was helpless in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant? The more important question here, however, is how long does it take for God's people to finally learn the lesson that our idols are sure to fail us? God gives His people victory when they return to Him.

2. God restores losses to His people when they return to Him.

“Then the cities which the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath; and Israel recovered its territory from the hands of the Philistines. Also there was peace between Israel and the Amorites.”

When the people returned to the Lord, the territory that had been lost to the Philistines was restored to Israel. Do you see the spiritual lesson here? When we are not walking with the Lord, we lose ground. We lose spiritual territory that was once ours. We no longer enjoy the spiritual blessings that are ours in Christ. We no longer know the joy of Christian fellowship. We lose our grasp of Scripture. But when we return to the Lord, we can recover ground that we lost. We can begin to enjoy our spiritual blessings in Christ once again. We are restored to Christian fellowship. We can begin to grow in the Word of God.

Through the prophet Joel, the Lord said to the people of Israel, *“So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the crawling locust, the consuming locust, and the chewing locust. My great army which I sent among you.”*

This was true for God's Old Testament people, and it can be true for us today as well. Although we lose time and we will lose out on blessing when we disobey the Lord and fail to walk in close fellowship with Him, in His grace, God can restore the years that “the locust has eaten.” God restores losses to His people when they return to Him.

Practical Application

Let's follow Samuel's "Ebenezer example."

"Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen, and called its name Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the LORD has helped us." (v12).

To commemorate the victory over the Philistines, Samuel set up a memorial stone. This was a common practice in those days, and Samuel rightly gave the Lord all the credit by naming it Ebenezer, which literally means "stone of help."

"Thus far the LORD has helped us." What a great example for us to follow! As we see the Lord at work in our lives -- answering prayer, sending deliverance, meeting our needs, and defeating the enemy -- we too should "set up our Ebenezer memorial stones," and honor the Lord by saying *"Thus far the LORD has helped us."*

At this point in time, Growing Christian Ministries has just completed 31 years of ministry. Right from the tiny beginnings until the present time, the Lord has faithfully blessed and provided for every aspect of this ministry. So, once again, we have thanked the Lord, and we have figuratively "set up our Ebenezer stone," saying, *"Thus far the LORD has helped us."* Have you ever taken time to figuratively set up marker stones in your life when the Lord has specifically blessed you? Let's follow Samuel's "Ebenezer example."