–Save This Page as a PDF–

Repentance and Recommitment at Mitzpah
First Samuel 7: 2-17

Repentance and recommitment at Mitzpah DIG: In what ways had the people of Isra'el become unfaithful to the LORD? What things needed to be purified in their lives? How did YHVH bring Isra'el to repentance? What was involved in their repentance? How did God demonstrate His faithfulness to Isra'el in this story? What did He require the Israelites to do? How did Samuel exercise his roles as both a judge and prophet of Isra'el? What were some of the ways in which he remained faithful to his dual calling?

REFLECT: How is today's Church in danger of mixing false doctrine with worldly entertainment and fixated with secular concepts of success rather than sticking closely to the Word of God? Are there areas in your life in which you need to confess and repent? Spend time asking the Lord to show you anything that is not pleasing to Him. What "Ebenezers" do you have to remind you of God's faithfulness? What kind of memorials can you set up as future reminders? Who can you help this week?

So the people of Isra'el got rid of their images of Ba'al and Ashtoreth, and served ADONAI alone.

From the day that the Ark arrived at **the house of Abinadab in Kiriath-Jearim** (**to see link click BI – The Ark at Abinadab's House**) **twenty years elapsed.** All that time **the Philistines** maintained their domination over **God's people**. **Isra'el** was reduced to virtual serfdom, forbidden by **the Philistines** to employ blacksmiths, lest **the Israelite** plowshares be beaten into swords, while **their** enemy maintained forts deep in **Israelite** territory **(13:19** to **14:5)**.[166]

During the period of **the judges**, **the people of Isra'el** had fallen into a cycle of **sin** and **repentance** (see **Judges At – Twelve Cycles**). **They** would turn away from obedience to **YHVH**, and **He** would permit an enemy to oppress **them**. After a period of suffering, the people would cry out to **God** for help, and **He** would raise up

a leader to serve as **judge** and **deliverer**. Under the spiritual misconduct of **'Eli**, the nation had again turned to the pagan practices of the world around **them**, and **YHVH** had removed **His** hand of blessing.[167]



Isra'el mourned (7:2-4): Many wonder where **Samuel** was when all these events took place. **He** probably would have been present at **Shiloh** when the news of **Isra'el's** defeat came and **'Eli the high priest** had **died** (see **Bc – The death of 'Eli**), and perhaps returned to **his** home in **Ramah** when **Shiloh** was destroyed (see **Ae – The Tabernacle at Shiloh**). During those long years of oppression, **Samuel** must have prayed and urged **Isra'el** to **repent** and return to **the LORD**. So when **all the people of Isra'el mourned and sought after ADONAI (7:2),** it seems that **he** waited for just the right time before calling a national convention. The apostle Paul says that **godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation (Second Corinthians 7:10).**[168]

Rather than remaining satisfied with a fleeting remorse, **Samuel** sought to lead **Isra'el** in true **repentance** so as to restore **the people** to **the LORD**. Therefore, **Samuel addressed all the people of Isra'el; he** said: **If you are returning to ADONAI with all your heart, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and Ashtoreths that you have with you, and dedicate your hearts to ADONAI (7:3a). The people** of **Isra'el** had added many elements of pagan religion into **their** worship practices, and **YHVH** used numerous **judges** to purify **His people**. **Isra'el** had not utterly abandoned the Torah or stopped worshipping **the LORD**, but

they had adulterated **their** worship with other Canaanite practices.[169] The Canaanite way of life was totally opposed to everything **Isra'el** should have stood for as **the people** of **God**, and therefore **repentance**, if it was to be credible, had to totally reject that foreign worship.

Putting away **their false gods** was only the beginning of **their** return to **ADONAI**; **the Israelites** had to prepare **their** hearts for **the LORD**. **Samuel** declared: **If you will serve only Him, He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines (7:3b).** This was in keeping with the first commandment: **You shall have no other gods** in addition to **Me (Exodus 20:3).**

An idol is a substitute for **God** – anything that we trust and serve in place of **the Lord**. **The Israelites** gave themselves to **idols** of wood, stone, and metal, but believers today have more subtle and attractive **gods**: houses and lands, wealth, automobiles, boats, position, recognition, ambition, and even other people. Anything in our lives that takes the place of **God** and commands the sacrifice and devotion that belong only to **Him** is **an idol** and must be cast out. **Idols** in the heart are far more dangerous than **idols** in **the Temple (Ezeki'el 8-9).**[170]

So the people of Isra'el got rid of their images of Ba'al and Ashtoreth, and served ADONAI alone (7:4). Ba'al was the male pagan **god** of fertility, and was believed to be the son of **Dagon** (see **Bf – The Ark at Ashdod**); **Ashtoreth** was the female goddess of fertility. The association of **Ba'al** and **Ashtoreth** expressed the depraved sexual ritual at the Canaanite shrines, making them especially abominable in the eyes of **Ha'Shem**. They were represented in pagan temples by statues. **The Israelites** had probably incorporated both the idols and the wicked practices into their worship of **YHVH**. **God** does not permit **His people** to create **their** own syncretistic religion, selecting at a whim this idea or practice from the world's abundance of **false gods**, even if some worldly practices seem "culturally relevant."[171]

Samuel gathered the people (7:5-6): Then Samuel said: **Gather all Isra'el to Mitzpah,** which was in **Benjamite** territory some seven miles north of **Jerusalem**. The phrase **"all Isra'el"** did not necessarily include every single **Israelite** living in the Land, but probably consisted of the representatives from all the tribal territories. This was a common place of assembly for **Isra'el**. In the time of the **Judges** the elders of the tribes gathered there to decide **Benjamin's** fate following the murder of **a Levite's concubine (Judges 19:1-20:1** and **3; 21:1, 5** and **8**). Later, **Sha'ul** was presented to **Isra'el** as **king** at **Mitzpah (First Samuel 10:17)**.

It was even the capital of **Judah** after the destruction of **Jerusalem** by **the Babylonians (Second Kings 25:23** and **25)**.[172] **Samuel** then added: **And I will** intercede and **pray for you to ADONAI (7:5).** Serving in **his** priestly capacity, **Samuel** was appointed to represent **the people** to **God**, and **God** to **the people**. Note the contrast here with the prior situation at **Shiloh**: it was the absence of godly **priests**, **'Eli's son's** being rejected for **their wickedness** (see **Ar – 'Eli's Wicked Sons**), that **Isra'el** had been disciplined by **ADONAI**. Now there was a true and godly **priest**, and **the people** were restored to **God's** favor.

Once **the people** had **gathered at Mitzpah**, **they** responded in two specific actions designed to express **their repentance** and recommitment before **the LORD**. First, **they drew water and poured it out before ADONAI.** It seems as though **they** were denying **themselves water** as a symbolic confession that **God's** favor was more important to **them** than life-sustaining **water**. This was a symbol of **their pouring out** before **YHVH** the depths of **their** surrender to **Him**. As **Yeshua** said: **I tell you the truth, unless one is born of water and the Ruach, one cannot enter the kingdom of God (John 7:37).** Secondly, there was public fasting, the purpose of which was to express special humiliation and grief for **sin (Second Samuel 12:21; First Kings 21:27; Dani'el 10:2-3).** For several days, **the Israelites** came before **Ha'Shem** declaring **their** eager readiness to **repent** and receive **His** renewing grace. There can be little doubt of the sincerity, fervor, and grief poured out in **their** words of confession. **On that day they fasted and confessed, "We have sinned against ADONAI."**[173]

And Samuel began serving as judge over the people of Isra'el at Mitzpah, the successor to **'Eli (7:6).** The name **Mitzpah** means *watchtower* and it was a vantage point for military purposes. For the first time, **Samuel's** activity as **judge** is mentioned, though **he** was primarily **the prophet** of **the LORD (3:20)**, and **His** word had authority all over **Isra'el (4:1)**. Notice of **Samuel's judgeship** is immediately followed by a report of **Philistine attack**. We are thus reminded that the function of a **"judge"** during this dark period was more executive than judicial. The word **judge** often paralleled **"ruler"** or **"prince" (Exodus 2:14)**, and one of the most common roles of **the judge** was to repel invaders **(Judges 2:16** and **18)**.[174]

The Philistines make war (7:7-8): When the Philistines heard that the people of Isra'el had gathered together at Mitzpah, the lords of the Philistines' feared Samuel was leading **Isra'el** to rebel against **their** rule, so

they moved up to take the initiative and **attack them.** It was a testing moment for **the Israelites**, who had been defeated so decisively in the previous battle (see **Bb – The Philistines Captured the Ark**). The circumstances, however, could not have been more different. Instead of the brash, misplaced confidence in **the Ark of the covenant (4:3)** or any other material object, there was genuine (if timid) faith in the power of **their God** to save **them** from **their enemies**.[175] From a human perspective, **the Israelites** had good reason to fear. **The Philistines** were a powerful and wealthy nation, possessing five major fortified cities, each with a well-trained standing army. **The people of Isra'el said to Samuel, "Don't stop crying out to ADONAI our God for us, that He may save us from the power of the Philistines." The LORD** would indeed defend **Isra'el**, but **He** wanted **His people** to approach **Him** in prayer and obedience.[176]

ADONAI fights the battle (7:9-14): Samuel took a baby lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to ADONAI (see the commentary on **Leviticus Ai – The Burnt Offering: Accepted by God**)**. He cried out to ADONAI for Isra'el, and ADONAI answered him (7:9). God** is faithful. **God** is attentive. It is the character of **God** to respond to the genuine need of faithful people. **For everyone who asks will receive (Matthew 7:8a).** It is **the Lord's** character to respond faithfully to the genuine need of **His** faithful **people**. **Isra'el's** great prayers **(Psalm 107)** are structured as a relation of **the people** crying out to **Him**, and **He** answering. This relation is disrupted whenever **Isra'el** believes that **she** is self-sufficient; or when **Isra'el** believes that prayer is futile; or when **Isra'el** concludes that **YHVH** is not attentive, does not care, or will not act. For us, prayer is a scandal in our modern world and surely violates our "enlightened reason." We may be sure, however, that such a daring prayer was also an affront to the "realists" who took **the Philistine** threat seriously. Prayer must have seemed silly to them when **the** mighty **Philistines** were approaching. Nevertheless, **Samuel's** prayer was not mere piety, but an act of real courage in the midst of real danger.[177]

As Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines advanced to attack Isra'el. So, **the offering** was made just in time, and would bring about **God's** special intervention. Although the approaching **Philistines** threatened to interrupt the worship, and the temptation to stop the sacrifice and defend the city, faith held out and **ADONAI thundered violently over the Philistines, throwing them into such confusion that they were struck down before Isra'el.** Intimated by **the thunder-storm** that broke **their** battle lines, **the Philistines** fled downhill towards **their** own territory. **The men of Isra'el rushed out from**

Mitzpah, pursuing the Philistines and attacking them all the way to Beth Kar (7:10-11). The enemy was decisively defeated.

Then Samuel took a stone, placed it between Mitzpah and Shen, and gave it the name Ebenezer [the stone of the Helper], for **Psalm 115;9-11** declares that **God is Isra'el's help and shield (7:12a).** This **Ebenezer** was certainly not **the Ebenezer** of **4:1** and **5:1**, since the latter is too far to the northwest for **Mitzpah** to be used as a benchmark for this location. Previously, **Joshua** had instructed **the people** to build a pile of **stones** beside **the Jordan River** to remind **them** of **the LORD's** miracle in parting the river for **them** to cross over **on dry ground** (see the commentary on **Joshua Au – The First Stones at the Jordan**). **Samuel** was now continuing the practice by setting up a monument to commemorate **their** great victory that **Ha'Shem** had won for **His people**. It is important to be reminded frequently of all **God** has done for us, lest we forget and begin to distrust **His** faithfulness. This is the reason **Yeshua Messiah** instituted **the Lord's Supper** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Kj – Breaking the Middle Matzah**).

Samuel set up **the stone, explaining, "Thus far has ADONAI helped us" (7:12b).** This does not mean, "Well, **God** has **helped us thus far** – let's hope that **He'll** continue to do so." On the contrary, it means that **YHVH** had been faithful to **Isra'el** throughout the past, and **the people** could depend on **His** continued help in the future. **Samuel** was teaching the Israelites they could fully trust in the faithfulness of **the LORD**. **The stone** memorial would serve as a constant reminder of that fact.[178]

Thus, the Philistines were humiliated, so that after forty years of supremacy **they no longer invaded Isra'el's territory; and the hand of ADONAI was against the Philistines as long as Samuel lived. The LORD** gave **Isra'el** the victory over **the Philistines**, suspending **their** threat for the immediate future during **Samuel's** lifetime; however, **they** did resume **their** subjugation during the kingship of **Sha'ul**. **The cities between 'Ekron and Gath which the Philistines had captured from Isra'el were restored to her, and Isra'el rescued the neighboring territory from the power of the Philistines. And there was peace between Isra'el and the Amorites (7:13-14).** The name **Amorites** is used loosely to cover the whole Canaanite population, who regarded **the Israelites** as less of a threat to them than **the Philistines**, and so **they** stopped **their** aggression against **Isra'el**, resulting in **peace** between the two nations.[179]

All the days of Samuel (7:15-17): Samuel continued in office as judge of Isra'el as long as he lived. The whole section ends with a summary of **Samuel's** ministry. **He** did not expect people to come to **him** at **Ramah**, but **he would travel annually in a circuit that included Bethel, Gilgal and Mitzpah,** all on the border between **Benjamin** and **Ephraim**, to the south of **Shiloh**, about 50 miles in circumference**; judging Isra'el in all those places.** These were **the cities where the schools of the prophets (First Samuel 19:19-24; Second Kings 2:3, 4:38** and **6:1)** were located. So this indicated that **Samuel** was the founder of **the schools of the prophets**. **But he would always return to Ramah, because that's where his home was, and he would judge Isra'el there too. He also built an altar there to ADONAI, Ramah** was a place of sacrifice between the time of **Shiloh** and **Jerusalem**. Thus, **the Ruach** summarizes **Samuel's** era: **Isra'el** was secure and stable both externally and internally under **Samuel's judgeship**. Traveling on **the circuit** gave **the people** confidence and trust in **God** and in **Samuel's** leadership. Despite all of this, **the people** of **Isra'el** would soon senselessly request **a king**, rather than **a** new **judge**, despite **Samuel's** opposition (see **Bq – Give Us a King!**).[180]

*Dear heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** for being perfect in **Your** character. How amazing that when there is repentance from sin, you listen and forgive! **The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some consider slowness. Rather, He is being patient toward you – not wanting anyone to perish, but for all to come to repentance (Second Peter 3:9). Repentance** is not merely the acknowledgement of sin, but real heartfelt sorrow and grief**.** True **repentance** is when someone is grieved over how their sin hurt **God**. **Repentance** sees the sin from **God's** point of view and desires to turn from that sin and go in a different direction **(Second Corinthians 7:9-11).** David is an excellent example of true **repentance** that leads to **God's** forgiveness and restoration. **Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your mercy. According to Your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. . .Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. (Psalms 51:1-2, 11)** Praise **You** heavenly **Father** for being such a loving **God** to accept true **repentance** and forgive! In **Your** Holy **Name** and the power of **Yeshua's** resurrection. Amen*