Israel Recommits to God

Devotional Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:50–58
Background Scripture: 1 Samuel 7

1 Samuel 7:3–11, 15–17

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.

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.

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.

Taylor Z. Stamps et al., eds., *The KJV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2026–2027*, vol. 74, The KJV Standard Lesson Commentary (Colorado Springs, CO: Standard Publishing, 2026).
Exported from Logos Bible Study, 9:38 PM October 13, 2026.

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.

Key Text

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

Unit 3: From Judges to Kings

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Samuel's instructions to the Israelites to rid themselves of idolatry.

2. Compare the leadership of Samuel to the roles of prophet and judge in ancient Israel.

3. Write a prayer of intercession, requesting God's favor and deliverance for their nation, local community, and church congregation.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

A. Comeback Kid

B. Lesson Context

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

A. What and Why (v. 3)

B. Rejection and Acceptance (v. 4)

Countercultural

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

A. Intercessory Prayer (vv. 5–8)

B. Animal Sacrifice (v. 9)
III. Last of the Judges (1 Samuel 7:10–11, 15–17)
A. Rout and Pursuit (vv. 10–11)
Long-Awaited Victory
B. Role and Actions (vv. 15–17)
Conclusion
A. Humble Hearts
B. Prayer
C. Thought to Remember

p 94 How to Say It

Ashdod	*Ash*-dod
Ashtaroth	*Ash*-tuh-rawth
Astarte	A-*star*-te (first *a* as in *had*)
Baalim	Bay-uh-*leem*
Ekron	*Ek*-run
Kirjathjearim	*Kir*-jath-***jee***-uh-rim or jee-*a*-rim
Ramah	Ray-muh

p 90 Introduction

A. Comeback Kid

Austrian-German weight lifter Matthias Steiner competed at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. There, he experienced some success, finishing seventh. The following year, however, Steiner struggled at the European Championships, failing three snatch attempts and ultimately finishing in the B bracket of the competition. His disappointing performance, along with additional conflict between officials and coaches, led him to quit the sport altogether.

For several years, Steiner stayed away from weight lifting competition. He experienced personal devastations and challenges during this time, including the death of his wife. Despite the hardships, he decided to compete in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. With an incredible lift of 1,016 pounds combined in the snatch and clean and jerk, he

won the gold medal! His comeback was especially inspirational given the personal troubles that preceded it.

Failure is an inherent part of the human experience. We make wrong choices, face setbacks, and try things that don't work out. We endure lengthy periods of waiting or feeling stuck. The Israelites suffered a significant defeat in battle against the Philistine army and lost the ark of the covenant (1 Samuel 4; see Lesson 10). But their story wasn't over—defeat was not the end.

B. Lesson Context

The intervening verses between Lessons 10 and 11 describe how the Philistines took the ark of the covenant from the Israelite settlement at Ebenezer and moved it to the temple of Dagon in the city of Ashdod (1 Samuel 4:11; 5:2). However, to put it mildly, things did not go well for the people of Ashdod after the ark's arrival (see 5:3–6)! The inhabitants of Gath fared no better when the ark was transferred to their city, about twelve miles east of Ashdod (5:7–8). Neither did the citizens of Ekron, about eleven miles due north of Gath (5:8–12).

These three relocations occurred over a period of seven months. It took that long before the Philistines p 91 realized that the ark was far from being a good-luck charm (see 1 Samuel 6:1–2). Therefore, with great fear and trepidation, the Philistines sent the ark to the Israelite settlement at Bethshemesh, about eight miles due east of Ekron (6:3–18).

God quickly made His displeasure known, however, as seventy Israelites looked into the ark and died (1 Samuel 6:19–20). The ark was to contain the tablets of the Law and may have also housed other items (see Exodus 40:20; Deuteronomy 10:5; compare Hebrews 9:4). But *what* they saw wasn't the point. Rather, the offense was their imposition on God's holiness. God had assigned holiness to the ark when He specified its location to be in "the holy place." The holy place had highly restrictive entrance requirements (Leviticus 16:1–2; Hebrews 9:1–5). In contrast, the residents of the town treated the ark like a tourist attraction.

Therefore, residents of Bethshemesh asked the people of Kirjathjearim, about eight miles away, to accept the ark. The ark remained at Kirjathjearim (approximately seven miles west of Jerusalem) for twenty years (1 Samuel 7:2a). During this time, the

Israelites repented, turning their hearts back to the Lord (7:2b).

I. First of the Prophets

(1 Samuel 7:3–4)

A. What and Why (v. 3)

3a. 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.

The nation had begun to recognize *Samuel* as a prophet (see 1 Samuel 3:20–21). Prophets spoke in the name of God, interpreting dreams, visions, and oracles (see Lesson 9). 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; see Lesson 6). Nor will it be the last time (example: 2 Chronicles 19:4).



Visual for Lesson 11. *Use this visual as a focal point while leading your class in a time of quiet confession and repentance to the Lord.*

The change of allegiance must be directed away from *strange gods* in general and from *Ashtaroth* in particular. The latter goes by various designations. "Ashtaroth" is the plural form of the name; "Ashtoreth" is the singular form. The plural form likely refers to the multitude of idols that honor her. The Septuagint, the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament, refers to her as "Astarte" (compare Judges 2:10–15, Lesson 6).

The Old Testament markedly intertwines service and worship (examples: 1 Kings 9:6; 16:31; Jeremiah 13:10). To *prepare* for resolute service and unadulterated worship, the people's *hearts* must return to *the Lord* (see Isaiah 29:13, quoted in Matthew 15:8; Mark 7:6). 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. And he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.

The threat posed by *the Philistines* is the catalyst for the Israelites' crisis of faith. The book of 1 Samuel describes several such conflicts (1 Samuel 4:1–11; 13:3–7, 16–22; 14:1–23; 17:1–53). To be in *the hand* of someone or something means to be under their power (see Jeremiah 18:6; etc.). God will be the Israelites' protector and deliverer when they live in a covenant relationship with Him.

p 92 **What Do You Think?**

Are the Israelites turning to God because of crisis and extreme stress or because they are truly convicted toward change?

Digging Deeper

Does the concept of "foxhole faith" apply here? Explain your answer.

B. Rejection and Acceptance (v. 4)

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

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. The decision the Israelites face is one of either-or, not both-and; God will not tolerate any rival deities.

Countercultural

A common experience among the people of God across every culture is the call to move away from cultural norms and into God's way of thinking and acting. Sinful choices exist all around us that humans consider normal but that God asks us to reject. In Roman times, dominant culture supported infanticide as a way to handle unwanted, sickly, female, or disabled children. The first-century Stoicist Seneca frankly admitted to considering it good to destroy those "who at birth are weakly or abnormal." However, God called Christians of the time to oppose such practices. Roman culture viewed

Christian respect for individuals with disabilities as strange and subversive.

What standards or established practices are you called to oppose? In what way is God calling you to be countercultural?

—DS-G

II. Actions of a Priest

(1 Samuel 7:5–9)

A. Intercessory Prayer (vv. 5–8)

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

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 (1 Samuel 1:19; 7:17 [below]; 8:4). There are multiple towns named "Mizpeh" (also spelled "Mizpah"), but this specific one is situated in the mountainous territory inherited by the tribe of Benjamin (see Joshua 18:26). The name *Mizpeh* means "place of watching," indicating that its location provides a good view of the surrounding countryside. During the period of the kings, it will become Judah's northernmost border fortress (1 Kings 15:22; 2 Chronicles 16:6).

The type of 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. To *pray for* (intercede for) others is one of the most important functions of Old Testament prophets (examples: 1 Kings 13:1–6; Amos 7:1–6). Samuel is later recognized, along with Moses, as one of Israel's greatest intercessors (Psalm 99:6; Jeremiah 15:1).

What Do You Think?

How does intercessory prayer differ from other types of prayer?

Digging Deeper

Who is qualified to act as an intercessor in modern Christianity?

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.

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 (compare Judges 20:1). p 93 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*. In the ancient Near East, idol worshipers often poured out water as an offering to care for their gods. But this example is different. Rather than giving God something He needs, the people offer Him something essential to sustain their lives. In this, their offering connects to their *fasting*. It is an act of penitence and proof of sincerity.

Some scholars connect the pouring out of water to ancient customs of requesting rain and a fertile growing season. In this context, it could signify their rejection of local pagan gods in favor of trusting the Lord as their provider. In either case, water is a precious commodity in an arid climate and, therefore, a costly sacrifice.

Third and fourth, the people fast and confess their sins. Fasting involves abstaining from food or drink to focus on spiritual matters. The time usually devoted to preparing and consuming physical sustenance is instead dedicated to prayer and worship. These actions contribute to the overall cleansing process. The people have already "put away" their false gods (1 Samuel 7:4, above). They intend to purify themselves before the Lord.

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 (Judges 2:16; 4:4; 10:2; etc.). This is the first time that the word applies to Samuel. He has been described as a priest (1 Samuel 2:18) and a prophet (3:20), and now he is a judge (compare 7:15).

What Do You Think?

How does fasting relate to confession and repentance?

Digging Deeper

Is fasting an integral part of life with God? What is your experience with fasting?

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.

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. 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.

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.

B. Animal Sacrifice (v. 9)

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.

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* (compare Leviticus 1:13). 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 (Exodus 22:30; Leviticus 22:27). The offering is entirely consumed by fire, leaving no part for Samuel or the people to consume.

Some might identify Samuel's role in making an offering as that of a priest. Samuel's role in this p 94 sense is informal. Priests had to be from the tribe of Levi (1 Kings 12:31; etc.), but Samuel was from the tribe of Ephraim (1 Samuel 1:1). Nevertheless, Samuel offered sacrifices and prayers on behalf of the people as priests did (compare 1 Samuel 2:18).

III. Last of the Judges

(1 Samuel 7:10–11, 15–17)

A. Rout and Pursuit (vv. 10–11)

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.

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.). Years before this event, Samuel's mother, Hannah, had prayed for the Lord to "thunder upon" His adversaries (1 Samuel 2:10). Now, as her son is a leader of the people, his cries for deliverance bring her hopes to fruition.

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 (the meaning of the word *discomfited*). The Lord stirs up fear among the Israelites' enemy.

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

In the last recorded battle between the Israelites and the Philistines, the Israelites fled after the capture of the ark (1 Samuel 4:10). 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 (1 Samuel 7:6, above). 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. The term *under* suggests that the destruction of the Philistines takes place at a lower elevation than that of Bethcar.

What Do You Think?

Where is the line between God's responsibility and human responsibility in facing life's battles?

Digging Deeper

What helps you discern between waiting on the Lord and acting?

Long-Awaited Victory

Following the destruction of the Philistines, Samuel erects a stone called Ebenezer (1 Samuel 7:12, not in our printed text). His declaration, "Hitherto hath the LORD helped us," brings closure to a twenty-year-long defeat (compare 4:1–3).

When I was four, my family served as missionaries, and we had plans to go to Ethiopia to translate the Bible. Unfortunately, civil war broke out in Ethiopia just months before our departure. We spent fourteen years in Nigeria instead.

Twenty-five years later, my father and I partnered with Ethiopia's largest evangelical church. We trained leaders on effective follow-up with new believers. The gospel was spreading into prisons and throughout rural villages with incredible results!

Although it came about in a way we didn't expect—through unforeseen circumstances and significant delay—God fulfilled His purpose of using our family to support believers in Ethiopia. What personal stories of defeat-turned-victory do you need to tell?

—DS-G

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B. Role and Actions (vv. 15–17)

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

The Israelites achieve such a victory that the Philistines cease invading (1 Samuel 7:13). The end of conflict brings relief for other groups in neighboring territories and, therefore, establishes peace in the land (7:14).

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 (compare Judges 3:10; 4:4; 10:2; 1 Samuel 4:18; etc.). Judges served as leaders of Israel prior to the institution of the monarchy. They held various roles, including those of political leaders, administrators of justice, and military leaders (see Lesson 7). Samuel, as a transitional figure, has often been called "the last of the judges, and the first of the prophets" (compare Acts 3:24; 13:20).

Instead of specifying a particular time frame, this verse emphasizes Samuel's com-

plete devotion—he serves *Israel* and God, *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.

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.

What Do You Think?

What are the benefits of a "circuit riding" style of ministry or judicial system?

Digging Deeper

Contrast circuit riding with long-term service to a single population.

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.

Although Samuel travels, he makes his home in *Ramah*, the place of his birth (1 Samuel 1:19). With Eli's passing and the ark's new residence in Kirjathjearim (see 4:18; 7:2), Samuel has no reason to remain in Shiloh. This suggests that Shiloh had been destroyed in war (4:12; compare Psalm 78:60). So, Samuel establishes a new place of worship near his home.

Conclusion

A. Humble Hearts

Under Samuel's leadership, the people of Israel demonstrated honest repentance and renewal. They identified themselves with the Lord, and He responded with swift provision. The story that began with defeat and despair, culminating with the capture of the ark of the covenant, concludes with recommitment.

And yet, the account is not free from conflict. The Israelites' humble request for intercession indicates that their reconciliation with the Lord is genuine.

Hearts and lives attuned to the Lord and purified from unrighteousness are poised to

see God's deliverance. But righteous living requires sacrifice. God still asks His people to reject the idols that culture offers. God still wants our whole hearts. Are you living in right relationship with both the Lord and the community of faith? Do you humbly ask for assistance when danger arises?

B. Prayer

Father God, we return to You with all our hearts, minds, and strength. We confess our sins and ask You to help us set aside anything that separates us from You. We humbly admit that we need Your grace and provision. Protect us, Lord, and deliver us from our enemies. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God requires wholehearted allegiance.