ISRAEL RECOMMITS TO GOD

Amaya accepted Christ at a youth conference, while she was in high school. She had been surrounded by a community that encouraged her, and she had even seen another friend come to faith.

But after going away to college, something changed. She hadn't given up on God, but things just didn't feel the same. It seemed as if one thing after another was getting in the way of her spending time with God, or even finding the right church. Those Sunday mornings were brutal!

But when she attended a Christian fellowship group, she knew that she had finally found her people. Here were other students just as committed to Jesus as she wanted to be. One evening, a staff member visited Amaya and shared a booklet. It had a simple message: either Jesus was sitting on the throne and directing her life, or she was trying to do it all on her own. It helped her see that she had been stifling the Holy Spirit, who was telling her to slow down.

That evening, she prayed like she had when she accepted Christ. She was ready to surrender control to God in a new way and in this new context. With the Holy Spirit to guide her, she was ready to face all the challenges ahead.

1 What distinguishes a committed relationship?

2 What are a few biblical examples of people who recommitted to God?

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.

3 So Samuel said to all the Israelites, "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." 4 So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only. 5 Then Samuel said, "Assemble all Israel at Mizpah, and I will intercede with the LORD for you." 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." Now Samuel was serving as leader of Israel at Mizpah.

Israel Returns to the Lord

In 1 Samuel 7, God's people are turning back to Him after the return of the ark. Israel has been floundering since the death of Eli, whose household God judged (see 1 Sam. 2:27–36; 4:17–22). But in 1 Samuel 7:3, Samuel emerges to address God's people, telling them to return to the Lord with all their hearts, ridding themselves of false gods, and committing to serve God alone. The people's idolatry explains their suffering at the hands of the Philistines. Instead of remaining faithful to God, they have been serving and depending on idols from the Canaanites, notably Baal and his supposed partner or consort, Astarte, or Ashtar.

But Samuel says that if they put away their idols and serve the Lord, God will deliver them from the Philistines. In verse 4, the Israelites respond by doing just that. The plural "Baals and Ashtoreths" likely denotes the various places and objects associated with Baal and Ashtar worship, including shrines, high places, altars, pillars, and depictions of the deities. Thus, "putting away" idols means

tearing down or destroying these and worshiping false gods no more. The people recommit to serving God alone.

In verse 5, Samuel calls for an assembly of all Israel at Mizpah, which means "outpost" or "garrison." This is a location in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin, about eight miles north of Jerusalem. Samuel's years of leadership were centered around Benjamite cities (see 1 Sam. 7:16–17). Mizpah was strategically between the hill countries of Judah and Ephraim and fortified by a three-foot-thick wall. Samuel plans to intercede with the Lord on their behalf, in his priestly role.

In verse 6, the people pour water before the Lord. This ritual of drawing and pouring water doesn't have an explanation in the Bible, except perhaps the "drink offerings" of wine poured out with other sacrifices (see Num. 15:4–7, 10). Here the ritual involves water and seems to serve a different purpose—perhaps expressing confidence that God could return water as rain. Given the context of verse 6, it is probably an expression of repentance and desire to return to the Lord. Additionally, the people fast and confess their sins (1 Sam. 7:6). In the Old Testament, fasting was a way to show humility and the seriousness of prayers before God. It also accompanied mourning (see Ps. 69:10) and here might stand for the people's grief over their own sin.

Samuel, who is the one overseeing the national assembly and repentance at Mizpah, is now the clear leader of Israel. The word used for "leader" (1 Sam. 7:6) is the same as "judge" in the book of Judges. Samuel becomes Israel's last in the line of judges. This great man, a priest and a prophet, is God's instrument to deliver the nation from their enemies and to tend to his people's spiritual health.

1 What was the sin of the Israelites?

2 What was the purpose of Israel's assembly at Mizpah?

3 How does Samuel lead the people during this time?

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.

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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.

7 When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled at Mizpah, the rulers of the Philistines came up to attack them. When the Israelites heard of it, they were afraid because of the Philistines. 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." 9 Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and sacrificed it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. He cried out to the LORD on Israel's behalf, and the LORD answered him.
10 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. 11 The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth Kar.

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15 Samuel continued as Israel's leader all the days of his life. 16 From year to year he went on a circuit from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah, judging Israel in all those places. 17 But he always went back to Ramah, where his home was, and there he also held court for Israel. And he built an altar there to the LORD.

The Lord Answers

In verse 7, the coming together of all Israel is seen as a threat (or inviting target) by the Philistines, who prepare to mount an attack. This strikes fear into the hearts of the Israelites after their recent defeats and the crushing battle described in 1 Samuel 4 last week.

After hearing of the Philistines' movement, the Israelites urge Samuel to keep interceding and calling out to God for rescue (v. 7). In keeping with their repentance, the people are choosing to depend on God for help instead of turning back to idols. Thus Samuel sacrifices a young lamb with choice meat as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. Exodus 29:38–41 prescribes such offerings as part of Israel's daily offerings, which were recently disrupted. Such sacrifices were also connected to purification (see Lev. 12:6, 14:10–11). In 1 Samuel 7:9, Samuel cries out to God on Israel's behalf, putting his leadership to the test. Will the Lord answer?

As the Philistines draw near for the attack, Samuel is still sacrificing. The opportunistic Philistines get more than they bargain for when the Lord Himself thunders against them (v. 10). This could mean actual thunder and lightning, which were signs of divine anger and judgment. The Canaanite god Baal was supposed to hold thunderbolts in his hands. But it is not Baal thundering against the Philistines, but the one, true God.

Terror seizes them, and they are thrown into a hasty, chaotic retreat from Mizpah. The men of Israel rush out after them, slaughtering them in a crushing defeat (v. 11). The Lord has come to Israel's rescue. After the assembly, Samuel continues as judge of Israel "all the days of His life" (v. 15). He travels a circuit between cities, settling disputes and making decisions for the people's good. He resides in Ramah, where he keeps an altar (vv. 16–17).

1 How did the Israelites respond to news of the impending Philistine attack?

2 How did God respond to the Israelites' cry for rescue?

3 Why did God deliver Israel?

If You Hear Him Calling

A young man stood before our congregation. He was twenty-something and had a story to tell—a story of return. He had grown up in the church, believing the truth. But then he wandered away—sowed his wild oats, slopped it out with the hogs like the prodigal son. But God never let go. A series of events and relationships drew the young man back into the church, and over time he found that God had never left. More than that, he found that God still loved him, despite his sin. If he was like the prodigal son, then God was like the father who ran down the road with open arms to embrace him. And so the young man stood before the congregation to recommit himself to the Lord.

I was a little taken aback. At the time, shame was getting the best of me; and I was mostly convinced that God didn't like me and didn't want to hear from me. But the young man's story stirred something deep within my heart. Or was that God doing the stirring? Was that God calling me back?

Over the years I've learned to listen to those stirrings. As a follower of Jesus, there have been plenty of times when I've wandered off to follow my own way. But then God called me back. He opened a door that I thought was locked. He provided an opportunity to return—to recommit myself to Him.

What will you do if you hear Him calling today? What will you do if you feel a stirring in the halls of your heart? Are there rooms inside yourself that are closed off to Jesus? Then throw open the doors. Let the light of the Lord drive out the darkness. Look for opportunities to recommit yourself—every part—to Jesus, because the opportunities are there. God graciously provides them. So, chin up. You might just see the Father running toward you with open arms.

1 Share a time when someone else's story encouraged you to seek God more.

2 How does God provide opportunities to recommit to Him?

3 What parts of your life do you need to recommit to the Lord?

My Recommitment

The reality of our sinful human condition is that we are prone to stray from God's path. In His mercy, God is always ready to forgive and invite us to choose life. What is one area of your spiritual life that has become complacent? Has your prayer life lacked intentionality? Does your worship need vibrancy? Have you stopped looking for opportunities to share your faith? Are there some fruits of the Spirit that are shriveling on the vine? Pick one to request as you recommit to the Lord this week.

Father, I want to serve You only. Give me new life as I commit to You, the source of life abundant.

Key Text

And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life.

—1 Samuel 7:15 KJV

Samuel continued as Israel's leader all the days of his life.

—1 Samuel 7:15 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of November 16 through November 21

Mon. Proverbs 29:1–14—Blessings of a Righteous Ruler.
Tue. Daniel 2:16–23—God Appoints Authorities.
Wed. Luke 4:14–21—Anointed for God's Service.
Thu. 1 Samuel 15:10–23—God Rejects Saul.
Fri. Matthew 12:14–21—God's Righteous Servant.
Sat. John 7:14–24—Do Not Judge by Appearances.

Next Week: 1 Samuel 16:4–13

Do you notice any common qualities among the leaders in your workplace? What about leaders in your church?