

When the Time Comes to Gather, Remember Ebenezer

1 Sam 7:3-5, 12

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.

...

12 Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer, saying, Hitherto hath the LORD helped us.

I. Introduction

A. Samuel and the Philistines

1. The wonderful thing about the Word of God is that it is the Living Word and it will speak to us daily, words that we need for that day.
2. Words that build faith, instruct, and save us.
3. Today's passage is like that, providing all three of those—faith, instruction, and salvation.
4. Just before the Prophet Samuel arose to judge and lead Israel, Israel experienced a troubling time—a period of turmoil in Israel.
5. The Philistines had defeated Israel, captured the Ark of the Covenant, and occupied their cities scattering the people.
6. Over the couple of months of that period of conflict, more people died in Israel—over 84,000¹—than have died in the U.S. since the COVID-19 pandemic broke out—just over 66,000².
7. In this conflict, the Philistines occupied several cities of Israel scattering the Israelites, and the Bible records, “*they fled every man into his tent.*” (1 Sam 4:10)
8. The invading enemy of those days sent the Israelites into a period of isolation.
9. But then the circumstances changed. God raised up the prophet Samuel and he proclaimed it was time to gather again.
10. When the Time Comes to Gather, Remember Ebenezer.

B. Our regathering

1. We find ourselves facing our own regathering time. With Governor Holcomb's 5-stage plan to reopen Indiana, we have been given hope that if the impact of the corona virus will continue to flatten and decline, the state will be fully opened in 2 months, by July 4.
2. But with the easing of restrictions and the restoration of freedoms, I see several parallels in the story in 1 Samuel 6 and 7, and several points we need to include as a part of our regathering.
3. Their call to gather included such things as repentance, cleansing, praying and fasting, facing the enemy, and crying to the Lord in trust.

¹ 4,000 died 1 Sam 4:2; 30,000 died 1 Sam 4:10; 50,070 died 1 Sam 6:19, for a total of 84,070.

² <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6>

4. There will be challenges to face, but we will find that God, as He has done up to this time, will help us through these next phases as well.

5. **When the time comes to regather, remember Ebenezer.**

II. Steps for returning

A. Time for repentance

1. *1 Sam 7:3 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.***

2. Return, prepare, serve—three words that describe what repentance is all about.

3. When faced with tragedies, I have heard a common human response from many people that sounds something like this: “Why does God hate me? Why is God punishing me?”

4. My first thought is: Your god is not the God of scripture.

5. Even if your behavior has contributed to the tragedies of the situation, it is not hatred and punishment that you are receiving, it is love and consequences.

6. God’s love has set some universal principles in place, and one of them ties bad consequences to bad behavior.

7. That tie serves as a means of teaching valuable life lessons.

8. We know that thousands of people die from drunk driving, so those bad consequences serve as valuable lessons to stop us from that bad behavior.

9. But the tragedies we experience are often not a result of us doing some bad behavior. Righteous people suffer tragedies as well as evil people.

10. We live in a world that, unfortunately, tragedies are just a part of it. That is an inescapable condition of life here on earth.

11. But regardless of how righteous you are, when tragedies come, searching your heart, examining your heart through repentance is always good starting point.

12. In that search, the Lord might show you something in your heart that you should deal with.

13. **If you are returning to the LORD with all your hearts**, Samuel said, that will result in some changes in how things have been. There will be some things you will **put away**—literally, “turn off” or get rid of.

14. What do I need to turn off to demonstrate that I am returning to the Lord?

15. The idols, the images, the strange gods, they must be removed from the heart and home. Look around. What image are you setting up? What “turn on” must be turned off? Does it look more like the world or like God?

16. **Prepare your hearts unto the LORD.** The word “prepare,” is the Hebrew word, *koon*, which means “to cause to stand in an upright position, fixed or steadfast; establish; be firm; firmly established, securely determined, to be stable.”

17. To prepare your heart means you are making a firm, stable, decision for God.

18. **Serve Him only.** There are plenty of things we have served, particularly ourselves. But it is time to make God the ONE we serve.

19. So in troubled times, it is always a good thing to start with repentance, regardless of where you have been.

20. At a time of regathering, we will include prayers of repentance. It must be our way of recalibrating as we prepare our hearts.

21. Have unhealthy or ungodly habits become part of our time in isolation? It is time to return to the Lord with a fixed heart, and serve Him only.
- B. Time for cleansing the land
1. Verse 4 reveals how seriously the people took Samuel’s warning to put away somethings. As part of their returning, they pursued a necessary cleansing of the land.
*1 Sam 7:4 Then the children of Israel did **put away** Baalim and Ashtaroth, and served the LORD only.*
 2. That is the same word as in verse 3. It means to turn off, to remove, to make depart. It involves the process of removing, or cleansing the harm causing element from among you.
 3. If you are returning to the Lord, do some house cleaning. And in our present environment, sanitizing is an important part of putting away the harm. Think about sanitizing as part of the process for returning to the Lord.
 4. I don’t believe it is stretching the meaning of the scripture beyond its purpose, but applying it to our present situation.
 5. At the time of returning, the house must be cleansed, and kept clean.
 6. As we regather, it will be needful to ensure safe and clean practices to prevent polluting the sanctuary or others who gather.
- C. Time to gather
1. The day finally had arrived—it was finally time for the call to gather! It had been an extended time of isolation, every man in his tent, but the circumstance began to gradually improve and it was time to gather together again:
*1 Sam 7:5 And Samuel said, **Gather all Israel** to Mizpeh, and I will pray for you unto the LORD.*
 2. Up to this point, gathering was just too dangerous. The Philistines had been in rapid expanse and the death was increasing. But now, the man of God saw that the time had come when they could regather.
 3. So verse 6 says they did:
*1 Sam 7:6 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.*
 4. The time had come to gather. Notice the elements of the cleansing water and repentance that were restated here.
 5. We won’t always be in seclusion and quarantine. It was time to gather to Mizpeh. It is interesting that Mizpeh means “lookout”, or a place where a panoramic view was possible.
 6. When they first regathered, the man of God wisely chose the place of the lookout. We need to be watchful and use our perspective vision to chart out our future course.
 7. Because as will be seen, the adversary was still nearby. They were just waiting until they regathered to attack again. We will come back to that.
- D. Time to pray and fast
1. Let us reread verses 5-6 to pick out two other important parts to emphasize when the time comes to gather:
1 Sam 7:5-6

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.

2. When the time comes to gather, prayer and fasting must be emphasized.
3. Why? Well it was time to be watchful and on the lookout, because the enemy was not far off.
4. How can we think our situation is anything different? I want to call for a time of fasting and prayer this week. Just settle it in your mind, establish in your heart, that prayer and fasting will be part of returning to the Lord.
5. When the time comes to gather, prayer and fasting will be part of it.

E. Time to face the enemy

1. As we mentioned, the adversary was not far away. They had simply stopped advancing their attack for the time Israel was in seclusion.
2. But notice how they adversary changed their operations when Israel determined it the time had come to gather.
*1 Sam 7:7 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.***
3. The enemy became active when the children of Israel gathered, and many in Israel grew afraid.
4. Back during the time of Israel's departure from Egypt, although God had set the armies of Egypt in their place, surprisingly, God led Israel away from the Philistines.
Ex 13:17 And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, Lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt:
5. And they had some minor victories over the Philistines during the time of the judges, like when Shamgar slew 600 of them with an ox goad, and Samson slew a few thousand of them.
6. But up to this point, there had not been a decisive battle against the Philistines that Israel could claim victory over them. They had always been too weak against them.
7. And now, because Israel had gathered together, the Philistines gathered against them.
8. I want to tell you that just because there is an enemy out there does not mean we must forever shelter in place. There comes a time to set the oppression of the enemy into the hands of your God. Cast your cares on Him for He cares for you!

F. Time to cry to the Lord

1. And that is exactly what Israel did:
1 Sam 7:8-9
*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.***
2. Our motto for when the time comes to gather is: **cease not to cry unto the LORD.**
3. Have you made some pledges to the Lord during this time of seclusion? Have you made a practice of crying out to the Lord during this time of seclusion?

4. Well, cease not, in other words, “**do not stop** crying to the Lord!”
5. If it looks like restrictions are easing, that does not mean all is well and there remains no more danger.
6. Do not stop crying out to the Lord for we are ever in need of His protection.
7. And as we read, offering a sacrifice of praise unto the Lord accompanies our crying unto the LORD.

III. Conclusion: Time to trust

1. Our final point is this, after we had done what the Lord asks of us, like repenting, cleansing the land, gathering, praying and fasting, facing the enemy, and crying to the Lord, it is time to trust Him for the outcome.
2. When you have done all you can do, you have to leave the rest to the Lord.
3. But that results in a great outcome!
1 Sam 7:10 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 [caused them to panic]; and they were smitten before Israel.
4. The Israelites had never before this point, directly faced the Philistines, army against army. This is the first of many military encounters against the Philistines, but it is important to note that this confrontation did not occur until Israel gathered together.
5. And in gathering together, they did so with total trust in the Lord, not reckless self exaltation or pride.
6. And in that first battle, the Lord thundered a great thunder that scared the Philistines, so with God’s direct intervention, Israel defeated the Philistines for the first time ever.
7. And following the battle, Samuel set up a memorial to commemorate the victory. He called it the Stone of Ebenezer:
1 Sam 7:12-14
12 Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer [the stone of help], saying, Hitherto hath the LORD helped us.
8. Today I am preaching to you, When the Time Comes to Gather, Remember Ebenezer.
9. Ebenezer literally means, “the stone of help.” The purpose for that stone was to remember, that up to this point, God has helped us.
10. So...what does that mean?
11. If they were to continue to follow after the Lord through repentance, cleansing, praying and fasting, crying to the Lord, they could face the enemy and trust their Stone of Help would be with them!
13 So the Philistines were subdued, and they came no more into the coast of Israel: and the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel.
14 And the cities which the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron even unto Gath; and the coasts thereof did Israel deliver out of the hands of the Philistines. And there was peace between Israel and the Amorites.
12. What had been taken away from them, was restored.
13. And not only the cities named, but also the coasts were delivered. In other words, their restoration brought victories beyond where they were before.
14. And God gave them peace as victors!
15. When the Time Comes to Gather, Remember Ebenezer—the Stone of Help; hitherto, the Lord hath helped us.