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Samuel's Work As A Judge

"He went from year to year on a circuit to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah, and judged Israel in all those places".

1 Samuel 7:16 NKJV

Bethel

Every year Samuel, the last judge and the first prophet of God's people, administered justice in a number of places in the land of Israel. In all, there were four locations, of which Bethel is mentioned first here. Bethel, meaning "house of God," was a town of great renown in the history of God's people. It was the place where Abraham the patriarch had set up his tent and where Jacob received precious promises from God (consider Gen. 12, 28, 35). Bethel played an important role in the book of Judges too. Deborah lived between Ramah – Samuel's later residence – and Bethel, dealing with legal matters of the Israelites (Jud. 4:4-5).

Later, Bethel was the place where the tribes gathered to go up against Benjamin, to discipline the children of their brother and to remove evil from Israel (Jud. 20–21). Apparently they had taken the ark of the covenant from Shiloh to Bethel (20:18 JND), in order to consult the LORD about the war with the Benjamites. Here we see how important it is in matters of discipline to understand the will of the Lord and to seek His face. In this respect, the Israelites acted in agreement with God's thoughts, although they lacked the true spirit of humiliation and failed to offer sacrifices before the LORD. But as soon as these conditions were met, God was with them and gave them the victory.

Bethel was already an important and memorable place when Samuel began his work there as a judge. Discipline had been exercised in that town before, and God had expressed His will concerning difficulties that had emerged. Thus, when Samuel started administering justice in Bethel from year to year, in a sense he continued a tradition.

There is a lesson here for us as well. Where can one learn the will of God better than *in His own house*? Learning His thoughts about any matter is possible only in His presence and before His face. It is only there where justice can be administered among the saints. Each statement that is made in the house of God, which is the Church of the living God, should be consistent with His holy presence. Every judgment which is meted out should be invested with His authority – and who would not recognize it as such? Perhaps someone may ask, “Who in our time can appoint himself to judge his brethren?” But Scripture tells us clearly that we need not lack righteous judgment, for in the Church, which is the temple of the living God, there will always be a wise person able to judge in disputes between brethren (1 Cor. 6:1-5).

Gilgal

The second place where Samuel administered justice during his tour of the land was Gilgal, another highly memorable place. The conquest of the Promised Land had started from the camp at Gilgal. In Gilgal, meaning “a rolling away,” the people were circumcised, removing from them the reproach of Egypt. It was also the place of the monument of the twelve stones, reminding the people of the miraculous way in which they had crossed the Jordan (Josh. 4–5).

The typical teaching connected with Gilgal reminds us that we have been crucified with Christ, have passed through the river of death and have been raised with Him. It is there where we were also circumcised spiritually and taught to apply the death of Christ to ourselves in a practical sense, so as to put to death our members which are on the earth (Col. 2–3).

There we take off everything which is connected with our former life in slavery under sin, our life in the world. Therefore, we see that Gilgal is the place of self-judgment, where the things of the flesh are removed. It is only from this starting point that we can take possession of the realm of heavenly and spiritual blessings, the things which are above.

Gilgal is a special place to administer justice. There we see that practical righteousness is possible only where self-interest and prejudice have been put away, that the saints do not act according to the flesh. Ecclesiastical authority administered in Gilgal should be in keeping with the meaning of this place. The flesh should be inactive, and there should be no room for worldly standards.

Without a doubt, when Samuel chose this town to judge Israel, he remembered its important past. It seems as if he wanted to call the people back to the place which had once been the starting point of their happiness and blessings.

Mizpah

Mizpah was the third town where Samuel administered justice. This is not Mizpah in Gilead, on the other side of the river Jordan. Instead, it was situated within the tribal area of Benjamin, not far from Bethel (Jud. 20).

First Samuel 7 also tells us the primary reason Samuel chose Mizpah as a place to administer justice, and it brings to light the special character of his administration of the law. Samuel was not only concerned about legal matters, but he desired to bring the people back into the presence of God. Mizpah, meaning “watchtower,” is, so to speak, the place of divine revelation, where we are brought into God’s light and obtain a clear view of our relationship with God.

The chapter also shows us a number of necessary conditions for spiritual restoration. Mizpah was the place of repentance – God’s people turning to Him from idols. The Israelites acknowledged their miserable state before God, which was symbolized by pouring out water before the face of the Lord (2 Sam. 14:14; Lam. 2:19). They confessed their guilt and cried for deliverance from their enemy’s yoke. In doing so, they did not trust in their own strength but rather in the efficacy, or value, of the burnt offering that was offered to God – a picture of Christ on the cross. Truly, God delivers His people for Christ’s sake!

After the people had confessed their sins, we read these remarkable words: “And Samuel *judged* the children of Israel at Mizpah” (1 Sam. 7:6 NKJV). Samuel’s aim to bring the people back into the right relationship with God was achieved by bringing their hearts and minds into God’s light and reminding them of “all the righteous acts of the LORD” (12:7). In this way, God was glorified.

Samuel honored God for the deliverance which He had brought about after the Israelites had humbled themselves before Him. The prophet set up a pillar of stone and called its name Ebenezer, meaning “stone of help,” because “thus far the Lord

had helped us” (7:12). He wanted to keep the memory of this divine help alive by returning to Mizpah and judging the people there from year to year.

Ramah

The last town where Samuel judged Israel was Ramah, “for his home was there” (7:17). He lived and devoted himself to the interests of the Israelites. Perhaps he lived in the house of his parents, the home where this God-fearing couple called upon the LORD until He answered their prayers (1:19, 2:11). Like his parents, Samuel brought all the problems and the needs of the Israelites before God, praying for light and wisdom, understanding and discernment. In this place, too, he expected help from above and judged the people according to divine principles.

Ramah, meaning “height,” was a mountain town. Samuel walked on the heights of faith, so to speak, like Abraham – whereas Lot walked by sight and chose the plain of Jordan for his dwelling place. Just like Abraham, Samuel had an altar. He was a worshiper who offered up his daily burnt offerings. To apply this to ourselves, we are “to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5).

This special detail is not mentioned in connection with the three other places which are listed here, at least not in these verses. In Ramah, Samuel built an altar to the Lord in order to seek and please Him. He thanked God for His patience toward a disobedient people, for all the proofs of His goodness bestowed upon a stubborn nation. Samuel must have understood something of God’s plans and purposes for His people, which were to be carried out by the anointed king, of whom he was the forerunner. At his altar, the judge of Israel paid homage to the God of Israel, the God of all grace (1 Pet. 5:10)!

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