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Judges-1 Samuel: Israel's Choice From God-Rule to Human-Rule - Lesson 2

1 Samuel: A Case Study in Integrity.

I. Introduction.

First Samuel is a book of transition. It tells the story of the transition from the days of the judges to the monarchy, the kingship of Israel. The end of the book of Judges says in several places, "There was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes." It says that by way of disapproval: Israel did need a king. There are three big figures, three big human characters, in 1 Samuel, and they are Samuel, Saul, and David. To a considerable degree, the book is their story. Approximately the first third of the book deals with Samuel, who is the last judge. He is not mentioned in the book of Judges but he is the last judge of Israel. Then comes Saul who is Israel's first king, though not a very successful king in the overall scheme of things. Then comes David. David actually dominates most of 1 Samuel, even though David is not yet king in the eyes of the people. He does get anointed as king, an advanced kind of anointing in which God indicates that David will be king, but it is not until 2 Samuel that David actually assumes the throne.

It is important to appreciate the fact that 1 and 2 Samuel go together. They are a unit and they are divided into first and second books because of their length. It is a little like those videos that you get from the video store that have two cassettes because the movie is too long to get on one. That is why we have the terms 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel. Nevertheless, the story of 1 Samuel does come to a convenient end with the death of Saul, which is a logical breaking point. We can speak of 1 Samuel as a unit, as we do in this lesson.

II. Samuel's Background, Call, and Leadership (1:1-8:22).

A. Background.

Samuel is a fine figure. He is a godly judge. He really does contrast with judges like Gideon or Jephthah or especially Samson in the way that he is successful militarily, leading the Israelites against their primary enemy, the Philistines; in the way that he is loyal to the Word of God, to God's covenant; in the way he teaches that Word to the people of Israel, and the faithfulness with which he carries on his work as a judge. The judges were actually political military leaders. But as political military leaders, they also had a secondary role: that was their judicial role in which people came to them, sort of like going to the Supreme Court of a country, to get rulings on difficult legal matters. Samuel functioned in that way for the people of Israel. He was respected and revered; and his godliness is a fine model, a fine example for us, and always has been appreciated by people who have read this book.

B. Call.

The story begins with Hannah's concern, that she would have a child. She was childless for a long time, and it was hard for her in that culture to be comforted by anything else but the thought of finally having a child. When God in His mercy gave Hannah a child, He did give her a special child, Samuel. She dedicated him to the Lord; and he served the Lord as an assistant to

the high priest Eli at the tabernacle at Shiloh. The stories about his childhood are interesting, because he really was called by God. He was called at a young age. He was called with the "double naming" that in the Bible indicates tenderness and affection. God calls him, "Samuel, Samuel."

C. Leadership.

After he grows up, he becomes a judge and experiences in his lifetime some of the gains and losses that were characteristic of those days before the monarchy in Israel, in the eleventh century B.C. One thing that happened during his early years was the loss of the ark of the covenant in battle to the Philistines. This is described in the early chapters of 1 Samuel as a terrible blow to the people. Indeed, upon hearing the news, the high priest Eli falls over dead of an apparent heart attack or stroke, so severe was the news to him. The ark represented God's presence among His people and so they brought it out with them into battle, this big box carried by poles through golden rings with the Ten Commandments inside. This was the people's symbol of the presence of God.

The fact that the enemy could capture that important symbol is an indication of the way that things were going. In other words, the Israelites were losing the Promised Land. Bit by bit, little by little, they were actually losing territory, losing various battles. And the Philistines, who originally started along the Mediterranean seacoast on the west, were making more and more inroads into the heartland of Israel proper, capturing this town and that, this region and that, taking away people's homes and fields. And so, it was a difficult time.

III. The Anointing and Rejection of Saul as King (9:1-15:35).

Samuel, faithful to God as an adult, taking over as one of the judges, was able to stem that tide in many ways. We read in some of the chapters about his successes militarily as he led the people. But, he was getting very old. Soon enough, as is described for us in chapters 8-10, the people of Israel begin to demand a king. Their motives for demanding a king were not ideal. They say, in chapter 8, when they come to Samuel: "Give us a king so that we can be like the other nations."

This was always a problem for the people of Israel, a tendency to think in terms of copying others. That is one of the factors that got them into idolatry so easily and so constantly. It is one of the factors that made them compromise religiously. It is one of the factors that tended to take their attention away from the Lord and trust in Him and place it in military might and political alliances. In chapter 8, they are doing it again. They are saying to Samuel, "You are old, you have gone into retirement. Your sons, who have been appointed to be judges as successors to you, are corrupt; they are taking bribes. We cannot stand this. We need a king. Let us get rid of the whole system of judges. Give us a king that we can be like the other nations."

In particular, they wanted a king who would lead them out into battle. They sensed their own disorganization after Samuel became too old to lead them as a warrior in battle. They were keenly aware that they were losing frequently, if not almost always, and they needed help. They thought in terms of the way it worked in other countries, where a king had as his first

responsibility military leadership. God was not, in fact, against giving them a king; but God wanted to give them the right kind of king and for the right reasons. Through Samuel (in his role as prophet, since he was not only judge but also prophet), God warned the people that He could give them a king, but their king could turn out to be one who would take more and more power to himself, who would build up the monarchy, who would virtually enslave certain categories of people, who would bring about some successes but also would change the scope of things politically for the people of Israel, taking away some of their freedoms.

A. God Chooses Saul.

Nevertheless, they wanted a king and God in His goodness gave them one. Now the king they got was Saul, and we read in chapters 11 -15 about the early part of Saul's kingship. At first he was enormously successful in leading the people in battle. He was a very tall individual, strong and tall. This was impressive; people naturally liked him as a leader when they just looked at him. In addition, he seems to have had some real military skill. Unfortunately, he was also capable of fear. Some kind of psychological imbalance appears to have accompanied Saul in at least some ways. He was erratic as a leader, unpredictable, sometimes heroic; other times afraid. He was sometimes completely obedient to the Word of God and the principles to holy war; other times violating that very convention that God had insisted His people undertake if He were to bless them.

B. Saul Is Rejected as King.

There came a time when Saul violated the principle of holy war that says you cannot take plunder or spoil and you must annihilate the enemy. He took all kinds of goats and sheep in a battle and brought them home as spoils of war and also a king named Agag, an Amalekite king, to kind of show off, here's the king that we defeated and captured. Samuel, very old by this time, but a person God needed to employ, once again, came to Saul and told him that God had decided to reject him as king. Now, you know in the Bible we find many instances of a judgment sentence from God that is pronounced, but the execution of that judgment sentence comes at a later time. The prophets do this a great deal. They will announce a judgment upon this nation or that city with the understanding that in due time, when God decides, that judgment will actually be carried out. So the announcement of the judgment is a different thing from the imposition of the judgment.

This happens even back in the Garden of Eden with the prediction of "the day you eat it, thereof, you will surely die." When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they did not keel over; but rather their judgment had been announced, their death would eventually come, they became mortal. So this announcement of a judgment sentence on Saul, that he is rejected as king and will be removed as king, is actually given relatively early on in his career as king. In fact, years will go by during which time many stories about Saul, his weaknesses and problems and occasional successes, and many stories about David will take place.

IV. Parallel Lives of Saul and David (16:1-31:13)

At the same time however that Saul is rejected as king, God is not leaving His people without a plan. He is not saying, "I gave you the monarchy and now I am taking it away from you." Samuel

is told to go to a rather small town, Bethlehem, just a few miles to the south of Jerusalem. He is told to go there to the family of Jesse, and he is told to anoint the person whom God will show him to be king over His people.

A. David Anointed King.

Samuel makes the trip and he finds Jesse, and he asks Jesse to bring his sons out for examination as it were. Each of them proceeds before Samuel by age from the oldest down, but none of them is the one that God indicates to Samuel He has chosen. Samuel is puzzled, as are all of them. So Samuel, sensitive to God's leading, knowing that none of these were chosen, says to Jesse, "Isn't there someone else? Do you have any other sons?" Jesse says, "Well, yes there is one other, but he is really a kid; he is out tending the flocks." Samuel says "Get him." And when he arrives, though this young man, David, is very young and quite possibly rather short in stature, in other words, scrawny, God impresses on Samuel that this is the one who will be king.

It is an instance of God doing the reverse of what cultural expectations would suggest. In the ancient world, it was the oldest son who generally got the privilege. If there was an opportunity, you gave it to the oldest son. The oldest son got a double inheritance right; the oldest son would be the successor in a monarchy. And here we have a case of the youngest son, the one least likely for anybody from a human point of view to choose. But as Samuel reminds the people, we look on the externals, but God looks on the heart. God sees the inside, so in the same way that Abraham, not the oldest son, was chosen by God to be the leader of faith and the beginner of a people. In the same way, Isaac was not his oldest son but was the child of promise. In the same way, Jacob was not the firstborn of Isaac but was the child of promise. In the same way, Joseph was the eleventh-born of Jacob's children but became the most prominent of the sons, and so on. So we have Moses as well, the third-born in his family of leaders of the Exodus, Miriam, Aaron, and Moses.

We now have David as the youngest son, the least likely to be chosen; yet God, who is looking not at externals but real character, is making a decision contrary to what anybody at the scene expected. Thereafter, David knows that he is to be king, very few others do, it is a private anointing just at a family's house. Even so, conscious of the fact that God has chosen him to be king, David is very careful to be respectful of the Lord's anointed. Indeed what happens then is David becomes more and more successful militarily. He first goes out to visit his brothers who are with Saul in a battle against the Philistines, and there is a champion challenge given.

B. David and Goliath.

The Philistines have got their combat champion named Goliath. He is big, and he is ready to fight. They issued the challenge to the Israelites to come and fight this guy, sending out the best Israelite warrior, the two of them to fight, and then the winner to proclaim that his side will now be superior to the other. It is sort of a proxy battle in which one champion fights on behalf of each side. Saul did not know whom to send. Goliath is described in some of the manuscripts, most of the ones that are often used or have been historically used for our English translations, as six cubits and a span tall. That would be nine feet, nine inches tall, extremely tall. He is,

however, described in many other manuscripts, including the Dead Sea Scrolls, as four cubits and a span. That is six feet, nine inches tall; in other words, a real good NBA player but not inhumanly tall. He was an imposing figure in those days when the average individual was only about five feet high. This relatively small individual, David, pesters Saul, in effect asking him to allow him to go out and fight Goliath.

Could there be any hope that this little guy could win against that huge seasoned warrior? There are two factors: one of them, a very modest factor from a human point of view, David was a slinger. One of the kinds of skills in battle that the Israelites had was slinging stones. The book of Judges mentions 400 left-handed slingers that were in the Benjamite army. David was skilled with a sling, projecting stones at a high speed, but that is really very minor in the story compared to the fact that God was with David. It was God's will to bring David to prominence in this way. So a relatively unknown, quite young, probably on the short side, individual goes out not even wearing armor because the armor that Saul tried to put on him was just too cumbersome for him to be able to move his arms to get the stone out of the sling. He is up against a huge champion from the Philistines who has got full armor and a sword and a spear and even a shield carrier out in front of him. But David knocks him to the ground and cuts off his head.

Thereafter, of course, David is seen as a hero among the people.

C. Saul and David.

The Philistines still renege on the deal. They do not actually agree to be servants of the Israelites as they had projected that they would in advance of the encounter. David joins Saul as Saul's commander-in-chief. David becomes the general of Saul's army, inspires the troops, leads them ferociously, and they begin to have success. Saul invites David to marry into his family, and David marries Michal, one of Saul's daughters, and now he is Saul's son-in-law. But, that same instability that seems to have affected Saul increases, and sadly enough it seems to be enhanced by Saul's spiritual instability, the same kind of thing that caused God to reject him as king.

Saul begins to spend more and more of his time not interested in fighting the enemy but in getting rid of David. He becomes jealous of David; he becomes jealous of David's success within his own family, and David's friendship with the crown prince Jonathan. We see Saul in many of these chapters in the book chasing David. David ends up having to leave Saul's home territory in Benjamin to go on the run. David has to gather around himself a kind of private army, and he lives off the land almost like a bandit might. There are occasions where, in his desperation, he even joins temporarily with the Philistines and places himself at their disposal, along with his private army, as a kind of mercenary. God protects him from ever having to fight against the Israelites, and eventually David is able to, of course, be a very successful leader against the very Philistines that he got to know so well.

D. Saul Goes to Endor.

At the end of the book, we find the Philistines advancing; we find them making more and more inroads into Israel. Saul, having diverted his attention from fighting them to pursuing David, has

ruined the military strategy that could have brought success. And we see Saul increasingly departing from loyalty to the Lord, the God of Israel. Indeed, very close to the end of the book, Saul is at a place called Endor; and he actually consults a witch, a woman who is called in the Hebrew "an owner of a pit," or "a pit-lady." She is a woman who alleges that she can call down into this pit in the ground and can have contact with the spirits of the dead and through them get information about the future. It is a sad indication of the way that Saul's faithfulness to God had deteriorated.

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E. Saul and Jonathan Slain on Mt. Gilboa.

Finally at the end of the book, in chapter 31, we find Saul and Jonathan fighting valiantly on Mount Gilboa, where they have been attacked by Philistines and are trying to hold them off. One problem is that Gilboa is more than two-thirds of the way from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River. In other words, it is not nearly in the heartland of Israel; it is really in that part of Israel that the Israelites first took under Joshua. The Israelites are being driven back so far that they are back into some of the early places in their holdings of the Promised Land. There at that battle, Saul loses his life, and Jonathan loses his. The Israelites are brutally defeated; large numbers of them are killed, the rest flee.

The tragic story of Saul comes to an end, one who was anointed by God, one who was tall and strong, one whom God was willing to give skill and ability and success to, but who turned away from God increasingly, who had let his fears and his sinful inclinations possess him, and who even had rejected the best military leader, David, he ever had. Saul is dead, Israel is defeated, and 1 Samuel comes to an end.