

THE GRAND ESCAPE.

No. 19. Samuel the King-maker.

Why should the first 3 chapters of 1 Samuel be devoted to the birth and boyhood of one boy? Simply because that boy, born into an apostate Israel, was to have an important role in the life of the nation, introducing a major change from vacillating tribes under the rule of judges to a united and flourishing kingdom under the supreme rule of God.

Chapters 1 and 2 describe the godly Hannah – her childlessness, her desperate prayer and her fulfilment of a tremendous vow when her prayer was answered. Her psalm of praise in Chapter 2 has echoes in the Magnificat of Mary – another mother who had to give up her Son! It would have been far from easy for Hannah to part with Samuel at a very young age and any mother will relate to verse 19 – “Each year his mother made him a little robe and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice.” Before we reach for the tissues, consider that she probably had another child by that time, as God gave her 5 children - 3 sons and 2 daughters. Meantime Samuel grew under the tutelage of the aging Eli and served in the temple at Shiloh, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. Verse 26 says “the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favour with the Lord and with men” – again not unlike the description of the child Jesus.

Samuel was a great man, but he would never have been that without a great mother! Ladies, never forget the huge significance of the way you rear your children. Never minimise the importance of the maternal love that guides, encourages, understands and copes in demanding circumstances. Above all remember the example that is paramount – to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul.

Spiritual life in Israel was at a low ebb, as chapter 3:1 states. Even Eli, who may have been a fervent spiritual leader in his youth, was by now weak, slow of understanding, passively allowing his sons to indulge in evil practices, and unable to cope with the rising tide of evil. God stepped into this situation with the moving story of His calling to Samuel; the message was made authentic by its repetition of that already given to Eli through an unnamed man of God. It must have taken courage for Samuel to deliver his message of doom, and it is to Eli's credit that he accepted it humbly. Samuel was probably 12 years of age at this time and from then on his ministry slowly but surely expanded, summed up in verses 19-21 – “The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up ... all Israel ... recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LordHe revealed Himself to Samuel through His Word. And Samuel's word came to all Israel.”

Samuel was the last, and the greatest, of Israel's judges, and in a wider sense than any of his predecessors in that he had a steady administration of law as he went on a regular circuit, dispensing justice in local courts. He was also a prophet, carried out functions of the priest and was a great intercessor for the nation. His importance was not much less than that of Moses, as he carried out the monumental task of providing for covenant continuity and stability in the transition of the nation from the rule of judges to that of monarchy.

Chapters 4,5 and 6 describe the fulfilment of young Samuel's prophecy. The Philistines, constant enemies over many years, inflicted a major defeat on Israel and captured the Ark, presuming that it would give them victory over Israel's God. Eli, his 2 sons and his daughter-in-law all died on the same day; Chapter 4:22 comments, “the glory has departed from Israel.” However Chapter 5 reveals that the Philistine god Dagon was no match for Israel's God and the Philistines quickly realised that their only recourse was to return the Ark to its rightful custodians. The overjoyed Israelites took it to the house of a Levite, Abinadab, and consecrated his son Eleazer to guard it.

The Philistines had the hide to take the Ark of the Covenant into their temple and stand it beside the statue of their god Dagon. But Dagon fell and was broken, his power destroyed, his worshippers disgraced and terrified. Our enemy Satan is only as strong as we allow him to be; he falls and fails as we trust God completely for our protection.

In Chapter 7 the tide has turned. The Ark remained in Abinadab's house for 20 years, and verse 2 tells us "all the people of Israel mourned and sought after the Lord." No doubt this repentance came through the influence of the godly Samuel, as in verse 5 we read that he called all Israel to assemble before the Lord as he interceded for them and offered God a sacrifice to atone for their sins. The Philistines, thinking the Israelites had gathered for an attack on them, marched against them, whereupon the Israelites pleaded desperately to Samuel to pray for them. Samuel offered a sacrifice and prayed and the Lord answered marvellously. Verse 10 says, "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."

Wisely Samuel would not let them forget that day. He took a stone and set it up near the gathering place, Mizpah, naming it "Ebenezer", which means, "Thus far has the Lord helped us." Similar victories continued throughout Samuel's lifetime, and all the land previously captured by the Philistines was restored to Israel.

The years rolled on and this idyllic scene comes to an end in Chapter 8. Samuel was growing old and, contrary to the practice of previous judges, he appointed his sons as judges for Israel. With his own calling being so obviously of a divine nature, did he presume to know God's mind in planning the same role for his sons, who did not walk in his ways, but turned aside after dishonest gain, accepted bribes and perverted justice?

There's a warning here. While Joel and Abijah had to take responsibility eventually for their own behaviour, we can't help wondering if Samuel failed in being the ideal parent – especially since he had the bad example of Eli to warn him. Was he away from home too much to be a guide for his own sons? Was he so concerned with the problems of the nation that he had no time or energy to listen to the problems of his sons? It's a trap for many a conscientious pastor. It is a tragedy when church congregations make demands on their leaders which lead to the neglect of their home and family life.

The evil behaviour of Joel and Abijah was the trigger for the nation to ask for a king. Poor Samuel, so used to keeping a firm hand on the reins, and with the words "you are old" ringing in his ears, was shattered. But God assured him in verses 7 and 22, "It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected Me as their king.... Listen to them and give them a king." God's ideal for Israel was a theocracy, with power administered through the priests. But failing this, a guided monarchy was the next best plan – and actually it was indeed in God's plan, if only the Israelites hadn't jumped the gun! It is to his credit that Samuel, with his lifelong habit of seeking God's will and imparting that to the people, accepted the situation and prepared Israel for the rule of a monarch.

Chapters 9 and 10 introduce us to Saul as the one God would use to satisfy Israel's errant request. He seemed ideal, "an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites – a head taller than any of the others." He was a humble, dutiful son of a rich family, a man of self-reliance and courage on a mission fraught with danger, and accepted humbly the advice and help of his servant. It is strange though that neither he nor his servant knew or recognised Samuel; perhaps this is indicative of the spiritual apathy of the nation. Samuel had been advised of God that he would encounter a man of Benjamin whom he was to anoint as the leader over Israel to deliver them from the Philistines. The meeting was cordial and Saul demurred when Samuel declared that to him "is all the desire of Israel turned." In humility Saul accepted the symbols of privilege given him by Samuel, and it was necessary for Samuel to have a long talk with him (verse 25) to convince him that God was calling him to take up the leadership of His people. In Chapter 10:1 Samuel anointed Saul privately and later in the chapter Samuel presented a rather reluctant Saul to the people as their king.

Back in Deuteronomy 17:14,15, Moses had given the Israelites a warning; "When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, 'Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,' be sure to appoint over you the king the Lord your God chooses." Nowhere in the story of Saul did God actually say He had chosen him. In fact, when Samuel later made his farewell speech to the nation, he rather accused the people with "Here is the king you have chosen, the one you asked for." (Chapter 12:13) Yet on the other side of the coin, it seems God

had selected Saul - see Chapter 9:15,16 - "I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him leader over my people Israel." Here we see two aspects of the will of God - His directive and His permissive will. All through the Bible we see the blessing that comes to man as he accepts and obeys the directive will of God and the distress that comes when he disobeys that will. Yet God in His grace and His eternal vision will let repentant man fall in with His permissive will and still reap a blessing. God "chooses" in accordance with His timeless agenda and His fathomless wisdom, and in full knowledge of what the result will be. He already had the man and the timing chosen for the right king for Israel, yet because of their impatience He let them have Saul. We mortals are never meant to understand the mind of God - we must accept that His "choosing" is far and away above our "choosing" governed by our limited human perception. Paul sums it up in that great doxology of Romans 11:33-36, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgements, and His paths beyond tracing out!" That is where trust comes in.

Chapter 11 gives us what is perhaps Saul's finest hour. With the Ammonites threatening the people of Jabesh Gilead, Saul was at last galvanised into action. Verse 6 says "the Spirit of God came upon him in power" and suddenly he took over the reins of leadership. At this time of national stress he showed himself to be decisive, ardent and wise. The dynamism of his leadership was such that he could lead his men into a difficult march from the central uplands of Israel, down into the Jordan Rift Valley and up the mountain slopes on the other side, to Jabesh. He used the strategy of surprise by dividing his forces into three, and was able to win a spectacular victory. The men of Jabesh never forgot this; many years later – in Chapter 31 - they made a courageous foray into enemy territory to retrieve Saul's body and give it an honourable burial. Verse 13 shows Saul's admirable restraint and forgiveness, and his acknowledgement that "this day the Lord has rescued Israel." This acknowledgement reached its fitting climax as Samuel gathered the people to Gilgal to reaffirm the kingship "in the presence of the Lord." (verse 15). In the great celebration that followed, Israel recognised not only their newly-appointed king, but their God Who was sovereign over that king, and over that nation. It must have been a heart-warming moment for Samuel!

But in Chapter 13 we see the beginning of the end. Shortly into his reign, Saul faced a grave military crisis. The Philistines were on the march again and the unity and confidence of the people under Saul was ebbing away. Morale in Israel was so low that the troops either hid or deserted, and the few that remained with Saul were "quaking with fear." Saul was at Gilgal and Samuel had previously instructed him to wait there for a week until Samuel should come and offer a sacrifice. But the wait was too much for the panicking Saul, who took it upon himself to offer the sacrifice. This intrusion into the office of priest was significant in that it highlighted Saul's limited faith. He found it impossible to submit to God's timing as indicated by God's servant; he wanted God's help, but on his own terms. Verses 13 and 14 give us Samuel's judgement; "You acted foolishly. You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you Your kingdom will not endure ... because you have not kept the Lord's command." These words of doom seemed to paralyse Saul, who with his mere 600 men had to endure the Philistine raiding parties without any attempt to defend their country.

In Chapter 15 we see Saul's second chance to trust and obey God through the word of His prophet Samuel. The Amalekites were a Bedouin tribe, continually harassing the frontier of Israel, raiding, looting and murdering. Their decadence and corruption were notorious; the only course to be taken was complete eradication. But once again Saul disobeyed, blaming the people for his own weakness. Worse, his early humility had turned to pride; far from giving glory to God, in Carmel he had set up a monument to himself! In grief Samuel had to deliver his verdict; "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice." (verse 22.) Saul acknowledged his sin, but it was too late; he who had rejected the word of the Lord, was now himself rejected. God had no more word for him: he never saw Samuel again.

Chapter 15 ends sadly, with Samuel mourning the change in Saul, and "the Lord was grieved that He had made Saul king over Israel." What would happen to this nation with its first king such a failure? But God did not need to resort to Plan B and in the very next chapter we see the beginning of the plan He had had all along, where a godly king would mould together a godly nation.

