

SESSION #17

1 SAMUEL

1. CONTEXT

Let's take a look at an overview of 4 major periods in Israel's history. First, the "camp" period – Egypt, their slavery there for 450 years, the wilderness when they literally camped, wandering in the wilderness, the books of Moses written during that time.

Then the "commonwealth" period, a time under the judges for 350 years, Joshua, Judges and the book of Ruth, in the land of Canaan now.

The next period is the "crown" period when they have earthly kings – the monarchy. Samuel and the books of Kings and books of Chronicles describe this period.

And then the 4th major period of their history, the "captivity" in Assyria and in Babylon. We'll come to books that deal with this period later. If you want a biblical historical summary of those 4 time periods in Israel's history look at Psa. 78 & 79 for some wonderful descriptions.

2. MAIN CHARACTERS

So we're now heading into the third period, the "crown" or monarchy period. 1 Samuel provides a transition from where we were in the previous two books – in the theocracy under the judges – to monarchy with earthly kings.

It's named after a personality who is perhaps fairly well known, Samuel. He is a transition character because he's the last of the judges; that's how he begins his ministry role. He is a judge, the last of the judges in a magisterial role, not a freedom-fighter role, but his story is told outside of the book of Judges.

This book of 1 Samuel tells us the story of King Saul, the first king of Israel, and introduces us to David who will of course be their greatest king. David's story is mostly reserved for 2 Samuel but we see him introduced here in this transition book.

There is a contrast in character lines with these individuals. First of all with Samuel and the high priest of the day, under whom Samuel served, Eli and his sons. Samuel's life line as he obeys God goes up and up and up. Whereas in direct contrast, the high priest Eli and his sons, their family line their spiritual line goes down very drastically.

The same thing happens with the contrast between the next characters, David and Saul. David's life line goes up, up, up. But Saul, who started off reasonably well, takes a sudden turn for the worse. 1 Samuel 16:13 and 14 give us the contrast in these two verses. Verse 13 tells us, *"from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power."* The next verse says, *"now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul."* And if any phrases describe the differentiation between the character lines of these two persons, those would be the ones. God's Spirit rests with David and goes with him now. He's bound to go up. But God's Spirit has departed from Saul – there's no other way he can go but down, when God's Spirit has left him. Bear that in mind as we take a look at these characters just briefly, one by one.

3. SAMUEL

Samuel – perhaps he's most famous for the childhood story. Remember his mother, Hannah? She was childless, and cried out to God to give her a child. God answered her prayer and because He answered her prayer she gave that little boy back to God. His name was Samuel.

And in order to give him back to God, Samuel when he was just a youngster, perhaps 5 or 6 years old, took up residence in Jerusalem at the temple and worked with Eli the high priest and helped him.

And of course there's the famous story of him hearing God speaking to him at night, running into Eli's bedroom saying, *"Here I am, Here I am."* And Eli says, *"No, I didn't call you."* This happens three times and then Eli says, *"If this happens again, just say 'Here I am Lord, your servant hears.'"* And little Samuel does that and God speaks directly to him. He is going to be the one who carries the torch of spiritual integrity for these next years in the nation of Israel.

He then is the last of the judges, but that isn't his only role. He's the first of the prophets (Acts 3:24). So his ministry is a kind of transition ministry just like the book of 1 Samuel is a transitional book.

He leaves two of the greatest legacies for the people of Israel that ever could have been given. And that's why the people of Israel esteem Samuel extremely highly. Among all the characters of the history of Israel, the Hebrew people esteem this man up nearly at the top, just a little below Moses. We don't tend to put him nearly that high but the reason that the people of Israel put him so high is on account of the legacies that he left. They were absolutely amazing, very significant.

He initiated the national educational system which lasted for hundreds of years; and he shaped the constitutional monarchy. He was the first attorney general, if you will. But not just the attorney general; he actually wrote the constitution and put it into practice. So his legacy was an enormous one indeed. We'll come back to the constitution that he shaped shortly. But that was Samuel, a veritable giant in the OT record.

4. SAUL

Saul, the first of the kings. A story that starts off so well but ends up so tragically. Perhaps the story has some roots, some poisonous roots, right at the beginning in chapter 8, verses 4 and 5. The people of Israel, the elders, get together and hold as somebody has suggested, a committee meeting instead of a prayer meeting. And out of that committee meeting comes this unholy idea: let's have a king because the other nations around us all have kings. We're the only guys around here who don't have a king!

So they go to Samuel and demand that he appoint a king for them so that as they say in verses 19 and 20, "*we will be like all the other nations*". Is that what God intended His people to be? To be like all the other nations? It's the exact opposite of what God intended. He intended His people to be absolutely peculiar, not strange necessarily, but peculiar in a good sense, identifiable by their lifestyle, priorities, values, that they are God's people. They're not like everybody else. And they go against God's central purposes for them by saying, "*We want to be just like everybody else.*"

Is that just an ancient problem? Doesn't that have a rather modern ring to it? We talk about it in terms of peer pressure, not just for teenagers but peer pressure at all ages. We really don't like to be different. It's uncomfortable, it's difficult to be different. We would like to just meld in with everybody else so that we don't stick out as somebody peculiar, unique, unusual. And we hide our light, as it were, under a bushel. God wants His people to be uniquely God's people.

Well, this desire and demand for a king got Israel on the wrong road. There's a deeper meaning in their request, however, and that is that they reject God as their king. They're still in the theocracy period, remember. God is still supposed to be their invisible king but they're saying, "*we don't want God to be our king.*" They come right out with it: "*We want an earthly king.*"

Samuel knows what's going on. He goes back to God and cries to God, "*God, they've rejected you from being King.*" He knows what's happening here. But because they insisted, God gives them their request. And that is sometimes a very sad state of affairs. God will sometimes give us what we demand but it may not be for our good.

These people had in their request a wrong motive – they wanted to be like everybody else. They had wrong criteria – they looked on the outward appearance. And they chose a man from the wrong tribe. The tribe of Judah was to be the scepter-holding tribe. They chose a man from the tribe of Benjamin – not even from the right tribe. And this is the beginning then of increased troubles as they take second best instead of God's best.

But Samuel is still God's man. And Samuel designs the national constitution. In the design of this document he puts in some important safeguards. The king will be directly responsible to God. That's a given. And the people will be responsible to God through the king. That also would be a normal situation.

But here's where it gets different. The prophets – and they will be increasing in numbers in the years to come – and the priests would also be responsible directly to God, not primarily responsible to the king. If you want to put it in modern management terms, they have a direct line relationship with the chairman of the board.

They have a staff dotted-line relationship to the CEO, the king. Now if you know something of management, this design has built into it some safeguards but it also has built into it some problems.

What are the safeguards? The main safeguard in the way that he designed the constitution is this: if the CEO, the king, takes the company off the rails and goes the wrong direction, the people are going to go with him. But there's two segments of society that don't go with him because they're not responsible to him; they have a direct line to the chairman of the board. They can get straight to God. They don't have to get sucked into the CEO's direction and so they can preserve the people, the nation, and keep them on the right path. That's the safeguard.

Ah, but in management terms where will the friction come? Obviously, the friction is going to be intense between the CEO and these other two groups of people who don't report directly to him; they've got access to the chairman. How in the world is he going to control the priests and the prophets when they've got that kind of access. He doesn't. And so the tension develops and we'll see it in the books yet to come, especially the books of the prophets. When the prophets and the king don't see eye to eye, the tension gets to be terrific. And also between the priests and the king.

5. WARNINGS FROM SAUL'S LIFE

There are some warnings from Saul's personal life. The one vital condition for true fulfillment of life is obedience to the will of God. That is vital – obey God! If we don't do that then all else is in vain.

You see the problem when you look through the life record of King Saul. He doesn't have control over his own personality under God. He doesn't obey God. He wants to rule independently of God. And as he himself in one of the most transparent, perhaps the only transparent honest statement he made later in life, said, "*I have played the fool.*" It was exactly what he had done by disobeying God.

Secondly, he let self get the upper hand in his life. He fought against the Philistines all during his rule as king. But the Philistines were never his number one enemy. The number one enemy for Saul was Saul. He was his own worst enemy. As the famous line

from the comic strip Pogo put it: *“We have seen the enemy and he is us.”* That’s what Saul would have said if he was honest.

He had some tremendous capabilities. He had some spiritual anointing that was very unusual even for his time, and some opportunities that were unique. But amazingly, in spite of all those advantages he did not have success.

And we can have all the advantages in the world. We might even have spiritual gifts and God’s Spirit on us and in us. But it doesn’t guarantee success any more than it did for Saul. That will only come as we follow God with obedience.

6. DAVID

The next character is David – we get introduced to him here in this book, as the anointed successor to Saul. Samuel goes to the family home of Jesse and anoints David in chapter 16. And verse 7 – one of the most well known verses in the book – gives us this important truth: *“the Lord looks on the heart; man looks on the outward appearance.”* Every time one of the brothers of David came into the room, Samuel said, *“Wow, that’s gotta be the guy. He looks so kingly.”* And God had to keep reminding Samuel: *“man looks on the outward appearance; God looks on the heart.” This guy isn’t it, this guy isn’t it, this man isn’t it, that one isn’t it, that brother won’t do.*

There’s a guy out looking after sheep. Bring him in; he’s the one. David wasn’t considered important enough even by his family, to bring him into the room with Samuel during this important process.

Then of course he gains fame very quickly in chapter 17 with the defeat of the giant Goliath.

Chapter 18 tells us *“he behaved himself wisely”*. And over and over again we read, *“He was successful.”* He had success, but linked to that phrase of success is the phrase, *“the Lord was with him.”* That’s why he was so successful.

He had a very warm beautiful friendship with Jonathan, Saul’s son. And then his years as a fugitive from Saul are described in this book.

And when you look at what happens to David on the map of Israel, you see how much running around he had to do to get away from Saul, who was determined to kill him out of jealousy. You begin to wonder, *Is it worthwhile to be obedient to God? Is it worthwhile to walk with God if this is what you end up having to do: run from place to place, hiding in caves, hiding in forests, running for your life, under terrific stress? Is that what God promises us when we walk with Him?* It must have been difficult for David. He does this not just for a few weeks but for years he's on the run. And this map gives us a small idea of how much running was involved.

But there were some wonderful results. Would we have so many good psalms in the Book of Psalms, if that period of time had never happened in David's life? Where do so many of the good psalms come from? They don't come out of David's time when he's king – oh, some do – but the best psalms, the psalms that stick with us because they hit us right in the heart where we live, those are the ones that come out of this period of David's life. Because out of the stress and terrible difficulties he's in, David cries out to God and writes down some of those prayers and some of those experiences.

Psalm 142 for example when he's hiding from Saul in a cave and Saul comes into the cave and nearly discovers him. He writes Psalm 42 in the back of that cave in candlelight.

Psalm 59, he's back home again. His wife hides him in the bedroom. Saul's army surrounds the house waiting for dawn. When the light breaks they will get David. And David is upstairs in the bedroom, looking out the window, peeking out from the curtains, and he can see all these soldiers all around the house, just waiting for him. And he writes Psalm 59 during that extremely stressful night.

Does God bring good out of tough times? Oh, He does, He does. David is a wonderful example for us of how that works.

1 Samuel ends maybe not surprisingly, with tragedy: the death of Saul and of his sons.

I hope you can join me for our next session when we look at David's triumphs and troubles.
