

I Samuel

Lesson 19 - Chapter 12 and 13

Last week things were very historical in presentation as we saw the torch pass from Samuel to Saul, and it was necessary to explain the behind-the-scenes political and social realities that pushed Israel towards the decision that the leadership made. And equally important we saw the moment at which the era of the Judges ended and the era of the Kings began, at a ceremony in Gilgal. This week we're going to peel back the layers on a couple of wonderful God-principles and patterns buried deep within this story that actually affect our lives on an almost daily basis.

This torch-passing in no way pushed Samuel from the scene (even though Saul was elevated). Samuel's function merely changed. Instead of being the visible political (and thus military) leader of Israel Samuel was now the power behind the throne. Not only had he publically anointed Saul as Israel's first king but he also made it clear that the new protocol for governing Israel was that Samuel would retain spiritual authority and thus would pray and intercede for the people; and he would present God's directions and oracles to King Saul. This role included calling Saul on the carpet (on Yehoveh's behalf) if need be. Samuel was essentially defining the new role of the Prophet that would be utilized all throughout the era of the Kings. And a Prophet would become as official an office in Israel as was king or High Priest.

In his address to the people that took place at the religious center of Gilgal, Samuel demonstrated not only his innocence and faithfulness in discharging his duties these past decades as a Judge of Israel but also that his unjustifiable removal as Israel's political leader was a mistake that Israel would quickly regret. The ramifications of the people essentially replacing the Judge Samuel with the King Saul was to reject God's form of government and administration of justice in favor of one the people invented and preferred (one that was modeled after their gentile neighbors). And the results were dire, and the people were already beginning to suspect the magnitude of their folly. Thus with the people of Israel instinctively understanding that there was no returning to the "good ol' days" of the Judges, and that the Lord saw what they had done in demanding a king as wickedness and rebellion, the logical question on their minds was, "what now?" Had the stiff-necked Israelites finally committed the "unforgiveable sin" by demanding (and receiving) an earthly king? Would the Lord simply retreat from them and then abandon them to their fate?

Let's re-read a portion of 1st Samuel chapter 12 to get the answer to that question. We're going to find that both the situation and the solution reveal patterns that we will recognize and need to apply in our own lives.

RE-READ 1ST SAMUEL 12:12 - end

Verses 14 and 15 carry a familiar tone: the covenant tone. Basically these two verses sum up the underlying conditional basis for the Covenant of Moses by using the standard "if, then"

formula. As usual the possibility of a divine blessing is first declared (in this case by Samuel as God's Oracle): ***"IF you will fear Adonai, serve Him, obey what He says and not rebel against Adonai's orders (both you and the king ruling you remain followers of Adonai your God) THEN things will go well for you."***

And just as in that ancient covenant the consequences (the curses) for violating Yehoveh's instructions are next pronounced: ***"But IF you refuse to obey what Adonai says and rebel against Adonai's orders, THEN Adonai will oppress both you and your leaders"***.

It is impossible for me to bypass this passage without a comment on a dangerous and erroneous doctrine that is prevalent in Christianity and has weakened and harmed us terribly; the doctrine that says that Christians should have no fear of God since we bear no divine consequences for our rebellion and sin. And this is because Yeshua has already paid for it all. This is the doctrine that says that God loves us so much on account of Christ that He will not ever act against us; God will not discipline or punish you IF you are redeemed, no matter how great your rebellion and sin. Folks that simply doesn't bear up to what we just read or to the Biblical pattern or to what the New Testament says. Over and over in the Tanach we find the Lord punishing His people usually NOT with eternal separation (not a cancellation of their redemption) but rather by using His (and by definition Israel's) enemies as a means to punish and discipline. Typically Israel was punished for its transgressions by means of foreign oppression, but on a couple of occasions that oppression rose to downright exile.

God generally does NOT punish us directly (I'm referring to God's supernatural wrath) as with Sodom and Gomorrah; but neither did He do so in the Old Testament except on rare occasion. There are precious few times when we read of such things as the Lord opening up the earth to swallow the rebels, or of His sending a plague of poisonous snakes to bite the trespassers. More often He simply used the wicked nations for His purpose of exacting a memorable (and hopefully corrective) toll for Israel's rebellion (and then in a divine irony smote the wicked for harming His people). It is no different today. Yeshua died for the eternal and spiritual consequences of our sins, but unless we remain obedient to God we can and will suffer His heavy hand in this present life. Don't ever forget the experience of Ananias and Sapphira in the Book of Acts. Here were two Believers who were killed by the Lord for their contemptuous sins.

CJB Matthew 7:22 On that Day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord! Didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we expel demons in your name? Didn't we perform many miracles in your name?'²³ Then I will tell them to their faces, 'I never knew you! Get away from me, you workers of lawlessness!'

CJB Romans 11:22 So take a good look at God's kindness and his severity: on the one hand, severity toward those who fell off; but, on the other hand, God's kindness toward you- provided you maintain yourself in that kindness! Otherwise, you too will be cut off!

The common saying in the Church today is that the Lord no longer punishes us; instead He just allows the "natural consequences" of our sins to occur. But notice: this is generally also what happened to Israel in the Old Testament. Israel lived in a God provided and protected

state of shalom for as long as God chose to keep His hand of blessing upon them; and this condition of blessing was entirely contingent upon their obedience and trust in Him (the standard “if, then” pattern). But when they were disobedient and crossed over some line in the sand (as defined by the Lord), God lifted His hand of blessing and protection and let the “natural consequences” of an aggressive and violent tyrant overcome them for a time, or perhaps let a “natural” drought take hold, or a “natural” pestilence invade, or some other such thing.

Another “natural consequence” for sin was that while a Hebrew could in most cases ritually atone for a trespass (by means of an altar sacrifice) many times FIRST there was a penalty to pay as prescribed by the Law of Moses. It could be paying reparations in the form of money or property, it could be turning oneself over for a time of servitude to the person who had been aggrieved or it could mean excommunication from the community for a while or forever. Usually when a modern Christian theologian speaks of the “natural consequence” of our sin he or she is referring to how that particular sin against God might also violate a civil law of our society and thus we pay a fine or lose our liberty for anywhere from a few days, to a few years, to the remainder of our lives. If we commit adultery in America (a sin but not a crime) we don’t go to jail or pay a fine, but the law does see such a thing as a contractual violation and thus gives our spouse the right to legally divorce us (another so-called “natural consequence”) more often than not with devastating and long reaching effects that can harm more people than merely ourselves.

The best law for any society is God’s Law even though none adhere to it. But in ancient Israel, God’s Law (the Torah) was (at least theoretically) the law of the land that was both the civil and the religious law. So the “natural consequences” for sin (and the biblical definition of sin is to violate God’s Law) was the same then as it is now especially as applied to God’s worshippers. And by the way, who was God’s Law intended for in ancient times? The redeemed of Israel. God’s Law wasn’t for the unredeemed; it wasn’t for the Philistines, or the Amorites, or the Egyptians. Well, Christians as the redeemed of God remain subject to earthly consequences for our sins, as directed by the Lord; it’s just that the atonement for the spiritual and eternal effects of it have already been provided in Messiah. When we sin we don’t have to take a lamb or a goat to an altar but (depending on the nature of the sin and the circumstances) there is as often as not a real and tangible consequence.

The Lord freely gives us the blessing of shalom in exchange for our obedience and trust in Him; but when we sin to some level that causes Him to react, His natural reaction is to lift His hand of blessing off of us, for our shalom to be removed (at least in part), and thus those things that we had formerly been supernaturally protected from are now free to oppress our lives. You can call this result “natural consequences” as a way around the erroneous doctrine that God doesn’t punish Christians, I suppose; but if that’s the case then it was also “natural consequences” that the ancient Hebrews faced for their transgressions. So I guess the “natural consequences” rhetoric (that seeks to erect a wall between Old Testament and New Testament reactions of God to our sin) kind of loses its meaning, doesn’t it? All consequences of sin are, and have always been, essentially natural consequences.

Now I discussed this topic with you for a couple of reasons: first because I wanted to discredit

a decidedly false (but mainstream) doctrine that needs to be jettisoned from the mindset of the Church. And second because it sets the stage for what is about to come momentarily in the next few passages of 1st Samuel 12.

Starting in verse 16 Samuel is going to give us an informative glimpse into how the Lord operates, a demonstration that indeed Samuel is God's Prophet, and we'll receive some divine instruction on what we're to do after we've gone astray and the conditions that have much to do with our lives have been irreversibly changed (and not for the better) as a result of our blatant sin. We've been unfaithful to our spouse, they've divorced us, our family has been broken apart, and now what? We've stolen that car, we're in jail, and will have a criminal record for the rest of our lives. Now what? We walked away from God, sought nothing but personal pleasure and in doing so got into illicit drugs and sex, and now we've lost our job, our home, our reputation. Now what?

But first, in order for Israel to see how close and connected God's Prophet Samuel is to God, Samuel proposes a demonstration. This story takes place in the time of the annual wheat harvest; this means it's early summer and in Canaan the rains have ceased and only rarely does any moisture drip from the sky. Samuel tells Israel that immediately it is going to cloud up, thunder and rain. And that the reason he is calling on the Lord to do this is for them to understand just how egregious of a thing they have done in demanding a human king be placed over them.

The demonstration is constructed around the weather for a couple of reasons; first, the ancients believed that thunder came from the gods. The Bible even uses thunder as a metaphor; the idea is that thunder is God's unseen spiritual wrath in heaven that He is about to physically pour out on earth (the thunder is a warning). So when the thunder happened it scared the living daylights out of the Israelites listening to Samuel at Gilgal. Second, rain usually is a blessing (except when it happens in harvest time, which it's not supposed to). And third, just like in Egypt when God used natural things in supernatural ways to smite the Pharaoh, so it is that rain is not unheard of in the summer in Canaan because they did have the occasional brief thunder storm. But to have it rain all day, and to do so at Samuel's command showed the supernatural element behind it. Needless to say Samuel had their attention by the end of that day, and Israel fully understood the grave nature of their foolishness and the highly offensive thing they had done in rejecting God as their king in favor of a mere human.

They begged Samuel to intercede for them and to plead with Yehoveh not to kill them. They confessed not only this particular evil deed (of demanding a king) but also all the wickedness that led them to this dreadful decision. But rather than Samuel giving them more bad news or condemnation, and telling them that they can only expect the worse from here forward, the crowd is startled when they hear: ***"Do not be afraid"***.

So important (and pertinent to our own lives) is what Samuel says to the people of Israel, I want us to read this passage yet again, together.

RE-READ 1ST SAMUEL CHAPTER 12: 20 – end

Here's the thing: God, through Samuel, is concerned that since what Israel has done is so terrible and apparently permanent, and the depth of their evil deed will have such widespread and long term effect (and the people are coming to realize it), that they'll simply throw up their hands in despair and give up. This concern is one that many of us in this room, or who are listening, may be confronted with right this very minute thinking: I have done such evil in my life, even doing great evil as a redeemed person who knows Jesus as my Savior, how can God still love me? Why would the Lord still put up with me? How can it possibly be that in this seemingly bottomless pit of diminished circumstances in which I now find myself (circumstances caused by my own destructive behavior and attitude), that I have any reason for hope? Hope for a better future or even hope for a restored relationship with God?

And here is Samuel's (God's) answer to this humanly insolvable dilemma: *"just don't turn away from following Yehoveh; serve Him with all of your heart."*

Let me paraphrase this: You indeed have done great evil, now don't turn yourself over to it. You have done a wicked thing, but the Lord has not abandoned you, so don't abandon Him.

Humans are the oddest creatures. I can't tell you the number of people I've known or counseled who either have decided, or were on the verge of deciding, that what they had done now destined them for Hell so they may as well live like it. They were doomed, and God had disposed of them (and they knew they richly deserved it), so they may as well eat, drink and be merry because what else was there to live for?

Little upsets and angers me more than to hear a Believer (or worse a Christian leader) say that grace didn't exist until the New Testament era. That statement is either one of utter ignorance of the Scriptures or is itself an act of purposeful blindness or rebellion meant only to fulfill a manmade denominational doctrine.

If what we are reading right now isn't about divine grace, then grace doesn't exist at all. And by the way, grace goes back to Creation, and we can read about the Lord bestowing His grace when human merit was nowhere present, over and over in the Torah. By God's grace Israel is forgiven for this amazing affront to God. And all He requires is for them to reestablish their trust and faith in Him and to demonstrate their sincerity by means of obedience to Him. And how is this obedience demonstrated? By scrupulously following His ways, as defined and already established in His Torah. It's there for us to read and examine to this very day. Their circumstances would not change, but they could set their hearts on God and be faithful even within these circumstances.

The second part of God's (and Samuel's) concern is expressed beginning in verse 21. The concern is that on the one hand, if Israel is convinced they are doomed and with no hope, they will seek to replace Yehoveh with the false gods of the region, which amounts to placing their hopes in nothing. And on the other hand if they want to stick to God Almighty, in their great desire to show repentance and sincerity they might be tempted to do all sorts of whacky, hollow, and meaningless things that accomplish absolutely nothing. Things that do not add to their righteousness, do not atone, and are not at all demanded by God. And the effect of either of those two bad choices is to wind up even FURTHER from the Lord, offending Him even

more. And yet, these two choices are probably the most common ones that Believers choose when we have greatly sinned and our guilt has overwhelmed us.

God merely says, "Come home". Grace. Come home, the door's open. But you must come home on God's terms, not yours'. God's terms seem too easy so they don't satisfy our human desire to DO something BIG! God's terms are the terms that have always been, but we want to do something new and spectacular. Sell our house and drop \$100,000 in the collection plate. Shave our heads, put on an itchy brown burlap robe and check in to a Monastery. Pray 12 hours a day. I've known of people who have quit their job, leave their family behind and penniless, and go on a mission all the while thinking they are doing a righteous thing that will show the Lord just how serious they are about wanting to please Him.

Folks, it's this same kind of misguided mentality that has kept millions (maybe billions) of men and women from coming to Messiah; the New Testament calls it The Stumbling Block. It is that faith, trust, and love of God (through Yeshua) are the only requirements for redemption. Anything we try to add to it but demeans it. However for the bulk of mankind faith is just too easy and it doesn't satisfy our want to do something that makes us feel as though we've merited our salvation through deeds and expressions of worthiness. Samuel knew His people well and that they would immediately begin to think of countless actions to work their way back into God's good graces, none of which had any value to Yehoveh whatsoever. And you know what? Those ways were bound to look suspiciously like the ways their pagan neighbors would attempt to get back into the good graces of one their gods that they thought they had offended.

So there's the good news: God is going to conditionally forgive Israel for rejecting Him and choosing a human king to rule over them. But there's also another piece of information supplied that although not new is humbling all over again. Verse 22 says, "**For the sake of His great reputation He will not abandon His people**". Sometimes it is implied by theologians that all that God does is for our benefit; not true. The protection of His Holiness and Holy Name easily outweigh our needs and well being. His concern is less for the people of Israel (who have knowingly and purposefully violated the covenant and if not for His decision to offer grace are done for); but rather it is to uphold His Holy Name. In fact, Samuel will continue to intercede on Israel's behalf not so much for Israel's sake as for the sake of God's reputation.

So in verse 23 Samuel reiterates that he will continue to be an intercessor for Israel because to do otherwise would be a sin added to his account. This is just another way of saying, "I'm not going to intercede for you because you deserve it. I'm going to intercede for you because that's the assignment God gave to me and for me to NOT do it would, therefore, be my sin".

Leaders (especially of congregations) I am speaking specifically to you now so please hear this: when your people speak against you, show you disrespect or ingratitude, gripe and are never satisfied you are NOT given permission by God to abandon your post. When the people you have taught, cried with, loved, cared for, and served for years hurt you or demand more than you can possibly give, you must not stop striving to lead them in the ways of righteousness. Rather, you must persevere all the more because obviously your people need it all the more.

Easy? Hardly. But perhaps you can look at things another way. If you don't see the people reciprocating in an appropriate way to your dedication to them, maybe you can see that for God's unfathomable reasons it remains your holy job to teach them the ways of the Lord and to care for them on behalf of our Savior. And it would be sinful to do otherwise.

Let's move on to chapter 13.

READ 1ST SAMUEL CHAPTER 13:1 - 15

Recall that at our Introduction to Samuel I said that it was not a matter of IF Israel would have a king, but of who, when, and at the unktion of whom. The Book of Judges was showing Israel (and us) that as humankind our nature requires that we need to be ruled by a king. However the proper King for us to be ruled by is God (and in the end, that is what will happen after we've gone full circle). Yet since it is the people of Israel who are wanting a visible, tangible, human king, this is the wrong circumstances. And since it's people who want a human king they automatically want him for all the wrong reasons and look for all the wrong attributes and long for all the wrong hopes.

The story of King Saul, then, is the story of the anti-king. This is the record of a king (the 1st King of Israel) who does what is right in his own mind. A king who hatches his own doctrines, attributes them to God, and then abides by these instead of God's Word; a king who pays lip service to the Torah but otherwise trusts his own heart to God's laws. Watch Saul in operation because many of his ways will be patterned into the Anti-Christ, who is also another anti-king.

Verse 1 reads quite differently depending on your translation or version. If you have a KJV, it will say something like, "Saul reigned 1 year, and when he had reigned 2 years over Israel.....". The New American Standard says, "Saul was 40 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned 32 years over Israel....." Many other versions like our CJB simply omit Saul's age (even though his age is obviously called for). What's going on?

First the bottom line; we don't know how old Saul was when he first became king. We have no ancient source documents or manuscripts in which this number is provided. Certainly this is some kind of copyist error or omission, but it probably happened well before 250 B.C. because that is when the Greek Septuagint was written and even then it was omitted, probably because whatever Hebrew document they were translating from also didn't have it.

So if your version has a number for either Saul's age or the amount of time he reigned, it was inserted in modern times by means of a guess. That said he was probably around 40 years old because he had a full grown son (Jonathan). It's far more likely that if 40 isn't close, he's OLDER than 40 rather than younger. So we need to picture a man in early middle-age.

And in verse 2 we see the setting for the first war Saul led as the recognized sitting King of Israel. I remind you that while Saul was king over all Israel, he and his tribe of Benjamin were part of the 8 tribe Northern confederation of Israelite tribes, so we'll find that he operates almost exclusively north of the territory of Judah. Not only did a ridge of rugged mountains physically and geographically separate the north from the south, but Judah never really

warmed up to Saul as their king (mostly for political reasons). So while as of this time Judah and Simeon (representing the Southern confederation of Israelite tribes) weren't openly opposing him, they certainly weren't interested in propping him up either. If something happened that Saul was deposed it wouldn't have broken their hearts. Thus the 3000 men that were divided into a group of 1000 and another of 2000 were almost certainly troops formed from Benjamin and other of the northern tribes.

Now verse 3 is the real start of the story because it explains why Saul and 2000 of his men were in Michmash and another 1000 were with Y'honatan in Gibeah of Benjamin (recall that Gibeah was Saul's family's home town).

The situation is this: the Philistines were growing more powerful and had regained a foothold in Israel's land holdings. Samuel had pushed them back and struck them down hard enough to put a crimp in their plans of expansion, some years earlier. But if the Philistines were going to expand their sphere of influence it was going to be to the east, because they were currently occupying mainly a strip of land along the Mediterranean Sea Coast. That was nice; they were seafarers and sea merchants. But in order to have something to export, and a place to sell what they could buy from the incoming ships, they needed land trade routes and all the land was to the east: Canaan. That put Israel directly in the crosshairs.

The Philistines seem to have been pretty pragmatic folks, with wealth in mind and not so much empire building. They really weren't interested in adding Israel's land holdings (Canaan) to what they currently occupied, but they did want to lord over many areas in Canaan, control the people, and have access to farm produce and labor, and the criss-crossing trade routes as a means to build their wealth.

Thus we find that early on in Saul's kingship, the Philistines had established a fort in Saul's home town of Gibeah, and even had a governor or administrator stationed at a nearby place called Geva. Apparently the Philistines had overreached and aroused too much hostility in Israel, and now that Saul was king he decided to try and push the Philistines back. But, understand: King Saul still did not have a professional standing army. His army was a militia that served according to each tribal leader's whim and benefit. Many of the tribes and clans cut their own deals with the Philistines so that not being harmed was perhaps their main benefit. If a Hebrew soldier couldn't see what was in it for him or his family or tribe he wasn't very interested in putting his life on the line for King Saul.

As much as history changes, the ways of men never change. King Saul needed some kind of crisis or national cause as an impetus to get (at least) some of the tribal leaders to encourage their members to go and fight for Saul to push back the Philistines. Saul's son took it upon himself and went to Geva and assassinated the Philistine leader in charge of the area. This infuriated the Philistines; just like throwing a stone into a relatively calm anthill, the wounded Philistines decided it was time to take off the gloves and come after Israel hard. Now King Saul had his crisis; it would be hard for any tribal leader in the area to not send troops since the Philistines were coming for retribution and to try to stake out a little stronger foothold in the process.

We'll continue this next time.