

Samuel the Prophet: Old Testament Model for New Testament Preachers

By Samuel Clemons

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INTRODUCTION

Two sentences in the Acts of the Apostles give evidence to the significance and importance of Samuel's career:

“He gave them judges until Samuel the prophet.” Acts 3:20

“All the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken...” Acts 3:24

Until Samuel; from Samuel - these prepositions indicate that this great life was a bridge, a connecting link between two great eras. Samuel the prophet saw the nation of Israel through that turbulent time between the period of the judges and the beginning of the monarchy. He was not only the last of the judges in Israel, but the greatest prophet since the days of Moses.

Samuel was no recluse, living apart from the nation in dreamy mysticism. Both as “statesman” and “politician” in the best sense of the word, he was called upon to play a great part in his people's history. At God's direction Samuel was a king-maker and a king-breaker, a heavyweight in the arena of power. Yet he remained a humble servant of the Lord to the final day of his long life.

HISTORICAL SETTING

Under the leadership of the great warrior Joshua, the nation of Israel had entered the land of Canaan around 1400 B.C. Through a series of military campaigns the land was captured and its inhabitants killed, driven out or subdued. The land, east and west of the Jordan River was divided among the twelve tribes.

After the death of Joshua, no single leader was chosen for the nation. Instead, God chose “judges” to lead his people for a time and to deliver them from the oppression of neighboring peoples. Sometimes after carrying out their act of deliverance the judges would continue to lead their tribe or region for many years. Sometimes they merely served long enough to drive away Israel's enemy or relieve its oppression in a time of crisis. This period of judges which began around 1385 B.C. lasted about 350 years.

The years of the judges were years of spiritual decline for Israel. The book of judges closes with these words: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.” Judges 21:25. There was little regard for the Lord and even less appreciation for his Word. The nation was on a long, slow drift from God. Making matters worse was the growing influence of Baal worship throughout the nation.

Without a strong leader, Israel was especially vulnerable to attacks from the Philistines. Residing in and around five cities in the southwestern part of Canaan, the power of the Philistines was growing as the period of the judges drew to a close.

Thus Israel found itself in danger of destruction by internal anarchy and by external attack. It was time for a new order of things. A strong leader was needed to assert and achieve national unity, to make the best aspects of the rule of the judges permanent in the office of a king, to resuscitate and maintain the allegiance of Israel to the God of their fathers, and to carry over the whole nation from the time of the last judge to that of the first king. That leader was Samuel. Under God he conducted his people from one age to another, without a revolution, and almost without the excitement which naturally accompanies so great a change.

BIRTH AND EARLY YEARS

Towards the end of the career of the judge Samson, a family resided at Ramathaim-Zophim consisting of Elkanah, a Levite, and his two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. It is supposed that Elkanah brought a second wife into his home because of Hannah's childlessness. It is clear that the house at Ramah was filled with jealousy and strife. Each woman is called the "rival" of the other, competing for the attention, love and affection of Elkanah.

When it became clear that Hannah was the favored wife, Peninnah responded with taunts about infertility and derision intended to provoke and irritate Hannah. This ridicule and scorn were not confined to Ramah, but seem to have reached their climax when the family went up to the tabernacle at Shiloh to offer the yearly sacrifice. At the sacrificial feast, Hannah was compelled to witness the many portions which were distributed to Peninnah for all her sons and daughters.

In bitterness of soul, Hannah went to the Tabernacle weeping and praying to the Lord. She made a vow that if the Lord would give her a son, she would give him to the Lord's service. Levites ordinarily were consecrated to the Lord's service after the age of thirty. But if Hannah were to have a son, he would be given to the Lord from birth and for life.

In Ephesians 4:11 we read that it is God who "gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be pastors and teachers..." Yet how often he chooses to use the resolve, the gentle urging and persistent guiding of a parent to accomplish his will in the life of a future pastor or teacher.

The Lord heard Hannah's prayer and granted her request. She bore a son and called him Samuel which means "God has heard." Hannah was determined to follow through on the vow she had made. Yet she must have cherished the few years she had with her son, making the most of them. Certainly these years of early childhood were important in the development of the prophet. Much of what Samuel learned and the character he developed must be attributed to the training he received from his father and mother in these crucial years.

Most likely when Samuel had completed his third year, his parents took him to Shiloh and presented him to the Lord. It was at this age that Levite children were permitted to be enrolled in the genealogical records and to enter the house of the Lord (2 Chronicles 31:16).

Elkannah and Hannah did not show any misgivings about leaving their son with Eli, although they might well have. The conduct of Eli's sons Hophni and Phinehas brought disgrace on the priestly office and caused people to look with disdain on the services of God's house. Samuel remained uncorrupted by all this wickedness. Hannah and Elkannah had trained their son well.

In contrast to Hophni and Phinehas, Samuel is a beautiful example of the blessings of training children to know God when they are young. Samuel "continued to grow in stature and favor with the Lord and with men." The Evangelist Luke applied a similar description to the twelve-year-old Jesus.

THE VOICE OF GOD

We are told that the boy Samuel "ministered" before the Lord under Eli. The Hebrew word translated "ministered" encompasses the duties of an apprentice to either a priest or a Levite. Samuel's service was to aid the aging priest in the traditional priestly activities associated with the offering of sacrifices. In addition Samuel probably served in a custodial role, filling the lamps with oil, trimming their wicks, opening the temple doors in the morning and closing them at night.

Early one morning when Samuel, according to Josephus, was twelve years of age, he was awakened by the sound of someone calling his name. He dutifully ran to the bedside of Eli only to be dismissed. Only after the third repetition did the aged priest realize that it was the Lord who was calling Samuel. Eli taught the young apprentice an appropriate answer. The fourth time Samuel heard his name called, he answered with the words that would become the essence of his calling as a prophet, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."

A true prophet is to speak God's word to God's people. The young Samuel's first assignment was perhaps his most difficult. He was to pronounce God's judgment on Eli's family because they had desecrated

their high office and the worship of the holy God. Samuel is fearful of telling Eli the vision, but Eli commands him to reveal the entire message. In response to the word of judgment Eli acknowledges that young Samuel is a true prophet of the Lord. He accepts the message without question. “He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes.” Samuel’s first prophetic accomplishment remains instructive for all to whom the word of the Lord has been entrusted. He accurately received and faithfully transmitted the Lord’s message to the one for whom it was addressed, even though the message was harsh and “made the ears of everyone who heard it tingle.”

ESTABLISHED AS A PROPHET

“The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord.” 1 Samuel 3:19-20.

Israel’s regular line of formal communication with the Lord is now restored through Samuel. God acknowledges and accredits Samuel as a true prophet. The Lord sees to it that every one of Samuel’s prophecies is fulfilled. With Samuel, God establishes the office of prophet to function alongside priest and eventually king. Samuel is recognized as the first of a long line of servants of God about whom Peter says, “All the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days” (Acts 3:24).

THE WORK OF REFORMATION

The depths to which Israel had fallen are illustrated in the events surrounding the battle with the Philistines at Aphek. Hophni and Phinehas superstitiously bring the ark of the Lord to the battlefield, failing to distinguish the symbol of God’s presence from the real presence of God. The army of Israel is defeated, Hophni and Phinehas are killed, the ark is captured and Eli, learning of these events, falls backwards off his chair and dies. Even Shiloh falls under the Philistine onslaught. “Where is the glory (Ichabod)?” The glory had truly departed from Israel.

And Samuel departed from Shiloh. He returns to Ramah, the place of his birth and there quietly and methodically, for the next twenty years, sets about the work of reformation. There he forms the beginning of the school of prophets. At Ramah he marries and becomes the father of two sons, Joel (The Lord is God) and Abijah (The Lord is my Father).

With the nation in shambles Samuel does not become discouraged. From time to time God permits so great a “shaking” of the things of this world, institutions and even order in society, that the things which cannot be shaken, the unseen and the eternal, may be more clearly defined and more eagerly sought after. Samuel held fast to the unchanging love of the Father, our Father, who loves us with a love which cannot be shaken.

MIZPAH AND EBENEZER

Throughout the land went Samuel, to the “whole house of Israel” urging the people to put away the false gods which had eaten into the nation’s heart. Shrines to Baal and Ashtoreth covered the land. Samuel issued a nationwide call for repentance and rededication to God and then summoned the people to the town of Mizpah. His “method” was simple. He preached God’s law, calling for the people to recognize their sin and repent. With penitent hearts the nation assembled, confessing their sins and expressing their sorrow. Then he preached the Gospel, using water symbolically to assure the people of their cleansing before God.

The Philistines at once sensed an opportunity to use the gathering of Israel at Mizpah to extinguish any flames of insurrection and win a major military victory. It became an immediate test of the nation’s faith. Instead of running away, Israel turned to the Lord for help. Samuel interceded with the Lord in behalf of the nation. He offered a sacrifice to show complete dedication to God. The Lord responded with a violent storm that frightened the Philistines and threw them into confusion. The Israelite army quickly pursued the Philistines slaughtering them along the way.

In order that the nation not forget what the Lord had done, Samuel set up a stone monument which he called Ebenezer, “stone of help.” Once again God had come to the aid of his people and Samuel did not want the nation to forget this.

The account of Mizpah gives us Samuel in his finest hour. Yet his course of action under God’s direction are so familiar. He first preached repentance, calling Israel to turn from its ways. Then Samuel assured the contrite people of forgiveness and reconciliation. He then prayed for the people in their time of crisis. And finally he reminded the people to give thanks to God for his act of deliverance and look to him in the future for help. Under God’s direction this same course lies open for all who shepherd God’s people.

Samuel continued to serve as judge of Israel for the rest of his days. The Philistines were subdued and did not invade Israelite territory again during Samuel’s lifetime. Samuel governed the nation from Ramah, making it a center of religious activity. As priest he conducted public worship and went on a circuit throughout the country encouraging people in their spiritual life.

REQUEST FOR A KING

Disappointment and apparent failure provide two of the staunchest tests of character. The character of Samuel was tested to the extreme in the face of a deep disappointment near the end of his career.

Samuel had served Israel well as prophet, priest and judge, but he could no longer maintain the schedule he had once kept as a young man. He appointed his two sons, Joel and Abijah to assist him, but they used their office for personal gain, accepted bribes, and perverted justice. They gave in to the great temptations which beset people in positions of public office and public trust. Yes, even the children of God’s called servants can err, and sometimes it results in grave consequences.

The elders of Israel assembled at Ramah to urge Samuel to make more satisfactory and permanent arrangements for the perpetuation of his authority. They expressed a desire that his leadership be replaced with a king. Instead of seeking to ascertain the mind of God, the people had made up their own mind. Instead of consulting the aged prophet, they dictated the policy on which they had their hearts set.

Samuel was displeased and hurt. He took the request personally and regarded it as a personal rejection. He took the matter to the Lord in prayer and was told by God, “the people have not rejected you, they are rejecting me as king.” The Lord told Samuel to warn them about the tyranny potentially inherent in a monarchy, but then grant their request. Ever faithful to God’s word, Samuel suppressed his disappointment and proceeded with the Lord’s plan. Once he realized that there was no alternative he became the effective organizer of a new era.

At God’s direction, Samuel anointed Saul as king and publicly proclaimed him monarch in the convocation at Mizpah. Under God’s guidance Samuel drafted the guidelines for the nation. It was to be a rule different from the reigns of the neighboring kings and despots. God intended to give his people an earthly representative of his rule - a king who would work to preserve the unity of God’s chosen people. God wanted the kingdom of Israel to be both an outward kingdom and an inward rule of faith in the hearts of the people. Ultimately he intended the earthly rule of his chosen, anointed monarch to prefigure the eternal rule of his chosen Anointed one.

FAREWELL SPEECH

Samuel announced his resignation at Gilgal. With Saul inaugurated and crowned as king, it would have been disloyal for Samuel to have retained the position of judge. At Gilgal the old prophet addressed the people he had served for so many years. He reminded them of God’s faithfulness to them and of the importance of remaining faithful to God.

Then in an example of continuing concern he pledges himself to pray in behalf of the people. Powerful prayer marked the life of Samuel. In the book of Psalms Samuel is mentioned as chief among those who call on God’s name, and as having been answered (Psalm 99:6). The prophet Jeremiah alludes to the wonderful power

which he exercised in intercessory prayer when he pleaded for his people (Jeremiah 15:1). Although he would no longer ruling as judge, Samuel could still intercede for the best interest of his country. We can picture him alone on the heights of Ramah pouring out his soul to the Lord, requesting a change of heart in Saul and renewed fear of the Lord among his chosen people.

SAUL REJECTED

The bright promise of Saul's early years was soon overcast. He who stood forth amid the acclaim of his people as one likely to achieve great things became one of those who fail at the high purpose of their life. At God's direction Samuel returned to "active duty" first to rebuke Saul for his impetuous lack of trust at Gilgal, and later for his utter disregard of God's command to completely destroy the Amalekites.

Caretakers of God's flock are never off duty when it comes to rebuking violation of God's express will. "To obey is better than sacrifice." Saul was willing to follow God's instructions up to a point at which his reason and pride took over. Saul's lapsed obedience was an indication of his rejection of God and his word. Samuel publicly proclaimed Saul to be an unfit instrument for accomplishing the Lord's work. Because he had rejected God, God would now reject him.

Until the day he died Samuel did not go to see Saul again. And yet Samuel mourned for Saul and he continued to pray for him. He evidenced a true shepherd's concern for the soul of the man he had anointed king. Shepherds of God's flock continue to pray even for those who by their words or actions have put themselves outside of God's flock.

DAVID ANOINTED

The last "official act" of Samuel was the anointing of David to succeed Saul in the office of king. A final lesson for God's aged servant Samuel concerned the outward appearance of the man who would next be king.

Under the pretense of offering a sacrifice, Samuel went as instructed to the house of Jesse in Bethlehem. There one after another of Jesse's sons passed in front of Samuel. Although they appeared to Samuel to have the look and bearing of future kings, none was the chosen one. Finally, the youngest son David appeared before Samuel. His youth did not suggest one with the strength and wisdom to rule a country. The Lord made it clear that David's qualifications lay on the interior, in his heart. David's true and trusting heart, the heart of a servant was exactly what God was looking for.

The name David means "beloved," an indication of the special grace which David enjoyed. The Lord loved the way David submitted himself to God's will, the way he loved the law of the Lord, the way he relied on the Lord as his Shepherd and longed for the coming of the Savior.

The aged Samuel was thus privileged in his final public act to inaugurate the head of the line of kings which would lead to the great King of Kings whose kingdom never ends.

CONCLUSION

Samuel the prophet was the one man the Lord used to work the transition in Israel from the rule of judges to the reign of kings. He truly bridged that great gap of one hundred years between Samson and David. This hero of the faith brought God's people from the age of anarchy into the era of the empire.

Though removed from us by three millennia, he remains an example to follow today. He fearlessly transmitted all of God's word to God's people. He used the law to first work remorse and sorrow. To those with contrite hearts, he followed with the gracious message of forgiveness. Samuel was a man of earnest prayer, interceding for God's people until his life on earth was through. He had a shepherd's heart that cared for all the lambs in God's fold. He listened to God's word and he trained others to live their lives in service to the Lord. And with the help of God's Holy Spirit he strove to conform his life and his work to God's will.

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