

Chapter 7 This chapter seems to be the perfect answer to chapter 8, where Israel asked Samuel for a king. Whether their request was right or wrong was not as important as their reason: “that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles” (8:20).

Exactly what they wanted in a king was fulfilled in this chapter: First Samuel judged them with wisdom and righteousness. He told them that if they would turn to the Lord with all their hearts and put away their foreign gods, God would deliver them from the Philistines. They obeyed and then sought God with fasting and repentance.

This obedience was basic to the military victories they needed, explaining why God left the Canaanites in the land, “so that the generations of the children of Israel might be taught to know war, at least those who had not formerly known it And they were left that He might test Israel by them, to know whether they would obey the commandments of the Lord” (Jud. 3:1-4). It explains also why God left Satan on the earth and in the Garden of Eden where he tempted man.

When the Philistines came against them, they asked Samuel to “cry out to the Lord our God for us.” He did just that, accompanied by a burnt offering, and God responded with such “loud thunder upon the Philistines” that they were “confused” and “overcome before Israel.” “And the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel.” Furthermore “Israel recovered its territory from the hands of the Philistines,” and “there was peace between Israel and the Amorites” (1 Sam. 7:14).

The victory and peace won through simple obedience not only proved God’s faithfulness, but it gave them a chance to learn God’s ways, that they “might be taught to know war.” What God did later for Israel through the most godly of the kings at the height of their obedience, he did through their simple obedience under Samuel’s leadership. And they had their Ebenezer, “stone of help,” to remind them of His faithfulness.

A “judge” thus placed a *spiritual* responsibility on *the people*. When they obeyed, God led them in warfare with astounding victory. Godly kings would also lead the people in obedience, but because they over-emphasized the military might and the material prosperity (that came through *obedience*), they fell into complacency and disobedience, bringing the people down with them.

Examples are Solomon (1 Ki. 10-11), Asa (2 Chr. 16), Jehoshaphat (2 Chr. 18:1), Amaziah (2 Chr. 25), Uzziah (2 Chr. 26:16), Hezekiah (2 Ki. 20:15-18), and even godly Josiah (2 Chr. 35:20-24). Of the godly kings, this leaves only Joash and Jotham. Joash turned away from God as soon as his mentor, Jehoiada the priest, died (2 Chr. 24:15f), whereas Jotham “became mighty, because he prepared his ways before the Lord his God” (2 Chr. 27:6). But when his son, Ahaz, raised in this prosperity and ease, became king, “he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel,” and even “burned his children in the fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel” (2 Chr. 28:2-3).

Because the judges were more dependent upon the calling of God rather than inherited royalty, “the Lord was with the judge and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies *all the days of the judge*” (Jud. 2:18). Yet the recurring theme in Judges indicated their need for stronger leadership: “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (21:25, 17:6). What they needed was a king who would lead them with an emphasis on the *spiritual* rather than the material, a king with the same heart for God Samuel had, but with royal authority to unify the nation under that godly leadership.

Chapter 8 When Samuel was old “he made his sons judges over Israel.” But they were dishonest, “took bribes, and perverted justice.” What happened? This is one of the paradoxes of life. Many of the most godly leaders in the Bible had from mediocre to wicked sons, beginning with Adam. Think of Enoch, who went to heaven without dying because he “walked with God” (Gen. 5:24, Heb. 11:5). He had “sons and daughters,” but apparently only one godly son, Methuselah. The same is true of each godly son among many siblings down to Noah, and only one of his three sons, Shem, produced a godly line. Yet only ten generations later, the same number of generations from Adam to the Flood, God again found Himself limited to only one man with whom to work—Abraham. And only one of Abraham’s sons sought God, only one of Isaac’s, and just two of Jacob’s 12 sons until their great trial and turning point in Egypt. (Gen. 25:1-6; 37-38; 44; 49).

Remember when God threatened to destroy the Israelites in the wilderness and make a “great nation” out of Moses? (Ex. 32:10, Num. 14:12; see Num. 16:45) The only thing we know of Moses’ offspring after this is the likely possibility, confirmed by the Talmud (the Jewish commentary), Kiel & Delitzsch, and others, is that the priest chosen by the tribe of Dan for their *false worship* was “Jonathan the son [or grandson] of Gershom, the son of *Moses*,” as in the NIV (Jud. 18:30).

Most of David’s sons were rebels, and even the “chosen son,” Solomon, ended up falling away from God. The pattern repeats down through David’s royal offspring: of the 19 kings of Judah, only six remained more or less faithful to God, listed above, and it’s highly questionable regarding Asa. And only two of these kings produced an obedient son—Asa’s son Jehoshaphat and Uzziah’s son Jotham, and that no doubt from the lessons they learned from their fathers’ terrible mistakes. But then these godly sons fathered very wicked sons! Success and prosperity either ruined kings or lured them into costly and foolish decisions, beginning with the first king, Saul, continuing with David, and finally even Josiah, perhaps the most godly since David. His untimely death through disobedience caused Jeremiah to weep. (1 Sam. 13, 15, 2 Sam. 11-12, 2 Chr. 35)

Before we reach a conclusion, let's try to understand the request of the Israelites, which, up to a point, seemed justified. Samuel was old, his dishonest sons were beginning to assume leadership, and the people no doubt dreaded a return to the anarchy of previous years between the judges. They had good reason to be alarmed, for the sons of Gideon, who was probably the most godly of the judges besides Deborah and Othniel, were murdered by another of his sons, Abimelech, who became a rebellious, renegade judge and brought great travail and affliction to Israel" (Jud. 9).

Furthermore God gave instructions through Moses for the king they would ask for: (1) "one from among your brethren," (2) he shall not multiply horses, wives, or silver and gold for himself, and (3) he shall make for himself a copy of the law and "read it all the days of his life," to maintain the fear of God and an obedient and humble heart (Dt. 17:14-20). This passage also presaged an ominous warning. For implied in their desire for a king was their rejection of God's rule and *His* choice for a king, which came only after *their* king had miserably failed.

Now let's look at the conclusion of these perplexing facts, for they speak clearly into our own lives. Basic to it all is the fact that God often gives us what we ask for *to our own sorrow* in the end. "They soon forgot His works; they did not wait for His counsel, but lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, and tested God in the desert. And He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul." (Ps. 106:13-15) "So they ate and were well filled, for He gave them their own desire. They were not deprived of their craving; but while their food was still in their mouths, the wrath of God came against them, And slew the stoutest of them, And struck down the choice men of Israel." (Ps. 78:29-31) Their request for a king falls into the same category: "I gave you a king in My anger, and took him away in My wrath" (Hos. 13:11).

A well known joke (or is it true?) illustrates the point: a man begged for and pleaded with God to give him a certain woman for his wife. Then after their marriage he spent the rest of his life pleading with God to deliver him.

There are three reasons God works this way. First, the capacity of love He designed in us can only be reached in an environment of complete freedom. Imagine a god who knows we'll misuse our freedom, and so limits it, or a "benevolent dictator" who forces everybody to "love one another." It would be impossible to love with any kind of meaning under these circumstances, and it wouldn't be long before his people would realize they were *slaves*, and rebellion would break out.

Second, God permitted things in the past because of the limited spiritual level of development of those times. "And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no widespread revelation" (1 Sam. 3:1). "Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint" (Pr. 29:18a). "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Mt. 19:8). For this reason also He permitted polygamy, though it caused untold family, social, and political problems, the effects of which from Abraham's failure have left the Middle East in chaos at this very hour (Gen. 16:12).

While it seems sad God must accommodate [work with] our ignorance, especially when it came to killing the wicked instead of evangelizing them (Dt. 7:1f, 1 Sam. 15), His patience with us also contains the seed of His amazing grace—that He works with us right where we are, so we can be 100% real, and *freely* work out our own salvation with *fear and trembling* (Php. 2:12).

Which leads naturally to the third reason: we learn best by our mistakes. The September 2004 issue of *Discover* magazine has an article on what's being learned by the collapse of the twin towers on 9-11-01. The author states that we learn *more* from buildings which fall down than those which don't. The spiritual application is this: We are so blinded by the pride of our hearts that it often takes something glaring and shocking to enable us to see it. Two powerful examples are Judah and David. Yet both these men won God's heart because in their awful failure they discovered their own hearts. (Gen. 38:24-26 combined with 49:11-12, 1 Sam. 25; 2 Sam. 11).

And that brings us to our final reason: We grow strongest in the worst circumstances, which explains why too much success and prosperity became the *real* enemy to Israel and her kings (2 Chr. 18:1; 26:16; 32:25, Ez. 16:49. Mt. 13:22, Mk. 10:23-25, 1 Tim. 6:9-10, Rev. 3:17). God's giants—Enoch, Moses, and Elijah—ministered to the people during their worst rebellion and lowest depravity, until Moses and Elijah wanted to die (Num. 11:15, 1 Ki. 19:4). For God brings us "into the net." He refines us "as silver is refined." He causes "men to ride over our heads," putting us "through fire and through water," only to bring us "out to rich fulfillment" (Ps. 66:10-12).

One of my favorite verses is Genesis 36:31—"Now these were the kings who reigned in the land of Edom *before any king reigned over the children of Israel.*" This verse tells me "the end of a thing is better than its beginning; the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit" (Ecc. 7:8). What seems like great waste and tragic, irreparable loss, will eventually bring forth rich treasures mined from the depths in thick darkness (Job 28).

And so it was finally time for Israel—and us—to learn another deep and lasting lesson—the hard way.

Points to consider:

1. "It is better to trust in the LORD Than to put confidence in princes," for "when a man's ways please the LORD, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Ps. 118:9, Pr. 16:7). However, citizens in a democratic nation have a responsibility to vote for leaders who reflect biblical values, who would seem to be *God's choice*. But they also are responsible to sincerely pray for the ungodly, "for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and

peaceable life in all godliness and reverence” (1 Tim. 2:2). Nero was king when Paul wrote this. (*Jude 8-10, Hab. 1:12*)

2. My pastor regularly says, “One thing we learn from history is that we don’t learn from history.” Poles and statistics reveal that the church in the free world is as worldly as the world in many respects, such as divorce. We are repeating what Israel and her kings did in the wake of her prosperity. To learn from history we must learn we’ll also reap the same consequences. “A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself, But the simple pass on and are punished” (Pr. 22:3).