

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever made a decision that you later regretted? Perhaps it was the college major you thought you liked, or a career that did not turn out to be that promising. It could also be something you really wanted but it ended up bringing you more trouble than enjoyment. When my kids were younger we bought two things in the backyard that I soon regretted. First was a swing set. Our boys loved it. It also became an attraction to the neighbors' kids. But soon the youngsters got bored of it. Then as everyone grew older no one ever touched it again. The second thing we bought a few years later was a portable swimming pool. At the beginning we were having fun in it. We invited the kids from some church families to play while I was doing barbecue. Very soon we learned that managing a huge puddle of water was a pain. The pool gradually became a natural habitat for algae. I drained the pool, scrubbed off the green slime and refilled it. After doing such cleanup a second time I decided that we should take the kids to swim in a real pool elsewhere. Recently when my wife suggested that we should consider buying our next house with a backyard pool I know I need to stand firm to say no. You may have made other bad decisions in life. It may even be a sin you once committed and you are still reaping the consequence. You clearly knew that it was something God forbade, but you did it anyway. The nation of Israel in the Old Testament was just like that. We comment: "How could those people be so dumb and stubborn?" Well, you are describing yourself; and I am like that too! After all, disobedient is part of our human nature. In the books of Samuel Israel was switching from leadership by judges to kings. Samuel had been their judge, but now the Israelites was asking for a king to replace him. In 1 Samuel chapter 8 the prophet warned his people how their future king would mistreat them by asking them to serve him, and taking their best land, produce and herds. But they responded: "We don't care! We want a king." God's love is big enough to let us go our own way. Fast forward to chapter 12 of the book. Samuel made a farewell speech to his people. He understood the wicked nature of men, but he also knew the heart of God. Samuel encouraged his people to walk in God's way despite their sin of asking for a king. From this passage we shall learn that God is righteous, and He will deal with us according to the way we honor Him.

EXPLANATION

1. 神興起僕人 God Raises up Leaders

Samuel began by reminding the Israelites the grace of God in raising up leaders. He presented two examples to prove that God had been faithful to His people. First, Samuel himself was elected by God to serve as a judge. He said in **verse 2**: "...As for me, I am old and gray, and my sons are here with you. I have been your leader from my youth until this day." Some of you may remember the record in chapter 1 of the book when Hannah prayed to God for a son. So Samuel was born. After Samuel was weaned Hannah fulfilled her promise by taking his son to Eli the priest so that Samuel could learn how to serve the Lord. Ever since then Samuel had been serving God faithfully. Samuel challenged the people to see if they could find fault in him. He spoke in **verse 3**: "Here I stand. Testify against me in the presence of the LORD and his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom

have I oppressed? From whose hand have I accepted a bribe to make me shut my eyes? If I have done any of these, I will make it right.” The answer was a resounding “no.” Samuel was a man with upright character. He had never taken advantage of the people God entrusted him to lead.

Besides appointing Samuel to be a leader God also raised up Moses and Aaron. **Verse 8** reads: “After Jacob entered Egypt, they cried to the LORD for help, and the LORD sent Moses and Aaron, who brought your forefathers out of Egypt and settled them in this place.” When God knew the affliction of His people He sent Moses and Aaron to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. **Exodus 2:23-24** record: 23 ...The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. 24 God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. This is a vivid description as if God needed a reminder of the covenant He made with the forefathers. Through Moses God also gave the Law to Israel and through Aaron the priesthood and sacrificial system were established. From the Bible we notice that Moses and Aaron were far from perfect. Moses burst out his anger in the wilderness when the Israelites grumbled to him, and Aaron led the people to commit sin by erecting a golden calf. But listen to how God evaluated Moses in **Numbers 12:7** – “...my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house.”

God proves Himself to be faithful by raising Samuel, Moses, Aaron and many others as leaders. The Israelites had to be mindful of the grace of God showed through those leaders, lest they might feel self-sufficient. Also, when crisis arose they knew that they could turn to God for help. God has also been gracious to our church. We started as a Bible study group in 1973. From a few people we became a church. From one language we developed two language ministries. From no pastor we had three pastors not too long ago. God also raises up many faithful coworkers to serve in different areas. We have to bear in mind that these leaders are raised by God. They are not elected by people as if they worked like government officials. Church coworkers are leaders of the people, but they are also servants of God. God has high standards for them. When I read Samuel’s testimony I could not help but asked myself: How does God look at me as His servant? Am I a humble person? Am I faithful to His calling? Am I a person with integrity, whether others are present or not? You have to evaluate leaders in the church based on the same standard too. Are they walking with the Lord? Do they defend God’s Word or their self-interest? Indeed every person has his strengths and weaknesses, personality and opinion. Ultimately, we put our trust in the Lord, knowing that He is sovereign. In due time He raises up the right servants.

2. 神管教罪人 God Reproaches Sinners

God is righteous, and He will deal with us according to the way we honor Him. In times of need God raised up leaders. However, Israel rebelled against God over and over again. Therefore, God reproached the sinners. Samuel testified in **verses 9-10**: 9 “But they forgot the LORD their God; so he sold them into the hand of Sisera, the commander of the army of Hazor, and into the hands of the Philistines and the king of Moab, who fought against them. 10 They cried out to the LORD and said, ‘We have sinned; we have forsaken the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtoreths. But now deliver us from the hands of our enemies, and we will serve you.’” Israel went through cycles of idolatry, God’s reproach, people’s cry out for help and finally, God’s deliverance. Hazor, Philistines and Moab are three neighboring enemies God sent as a means to reproach Israel for her sin of idolatry. The Canaanites believed that the Baals and the Ashtoreths

controlled the climate, yield of crops and fertility of animals. The Israelites were misled into thinking that worshiping those idols could bring them prosperity. Interestingly enough, when they were attacked by enemies the Israelites instantly remembered Jehovah again and begged Him for help. Then God sent judges to lead God's people into victory.

Besides going after idols the major sin in focus of this chapter was asking for a king. Samuel convicted the people in **verse 12**: "But when you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites was moving against you, you said to me, 'No, we want a king to rule over us' - even though the LORD your God was your king." That may sound like a legitimate reason to ask for a leader. In **8:5** the people presented other reasons to Samuel: They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have." The two sons of Samuel led a wicked lifestyle and could not be godly leaders to succeed Samuel. But God told Samuel the true reason behind their request in **8:7-8** - 7 And the LORD told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. 8 As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you." The Israelites had been rebellious since day one. They would rather follow a man than to follow God. Going back to chapter 12. Samuel asked God for a sign to convict the people. He said to the people in **verse 17**: "Is it not wheat harvest now? I will call upon the LORD to send thunder and rain. And you will realize what an evil thing you did in the eyes of the LORD when you asked for a king." God responded to Samuel's request and sent thunder and rain. The harvest time for wheat is about May to June. It should be the driest time of the year. During the growing season rain is a blessing from God. But rainfall during harvest time would cause devastating economical loss. God used this sign to reproach the sinners.

When we harden our hearts we can come up with all sorts of excuses to justify our acts. Just a few years ago some coworkers tried to introduce secular ways to rule our church. They argued that since a church is a non-profit organization we should run like any other non-profit organizations. Those coworkers even proposed a governance mechanism to ensure that members' rights would not be violated. They also believed that the number of layman elders in our church should be greater than the number of elders who receive a salary in order to maintain a good "balance." I am not saying that we should not abide by the laws and regulations of the government. Those coworkers were actually looking for loopholes to control our church. They did not want to follow God's Word to lead our church. God thus reproached our church. At least one-third of our congregation left. To this day we still struggle to find enough coworkers to serve in different ministries. But we still have not learned our lesson. We put our trust in men instead of God. One coworker claimed that there was no doubt that we should follow the Bible as our guide, but there should be a higher principle as we meet practical needs. If you have been around since the beginning of the year you know what I am referring to. God loves this church more than we can imagine. But God would not let go of any offense. He will reproach sinners, humble them and bring them to repentance by His means.

3. 神賜福義人 God Rewards Followers

God is righteous, and He will deal with us according to the way we honor Him. God raises up leaders when His people are in need and He reproaches sinners when they go astray. He will also

reward His followers if they walk with Him. Even though Israel sinned by asking for a king God's requirements for His people had not changed. Samuel told them in **verses 14-15**: 14 "If you fear the LORD and serve and obey him and do not rebel against his commands, and if both you and the king who reigns over you follow the LORD your God - good! 15 But if you do not obey the LORD, and if you rebel against his commands, his hand will be against you, as it was against your fathers." What Samuel said comes down to this – obey God and He will give you His reward, rebel against God and He will send His reproach. Was there any new requirement? No! Moses gave the same message when God gave the Law, when the Israelites were about to enter Canaan and soon before Moses died. After Moses passed away God renewed His covenant with Israel through Joshua by giving the same commands. Over and again God re-emphasized His standard to Israel. You think your parents or spouse are nagging? God beats them all! Why did God have to repeat Himself so many times? It is because we are forgetful and self-centered. And yes, Samuel learned from God too. Samuel reaffirmed the same reminder in verses 20-21, and again in verses 24-25. Samuel used at least four different verbs to make sure that the people got his message. They were serve (v. 10, 14, 20 and 24), which can also mean to worship a deity; fear (v. 14 and 24), which expresses reverence; obey (v. 14 and 15), which literally means to listen, with the anticipated response of carrying out what is heard; and do not rebel (v. 14 and 15). Therefore, there was no ambiguity about what the people's obligation were.

History tells us that the Israelites did not fulfill God's requirements. God could have abandoned His unfaithful people. Why did He still love them? Samuel answered the question in **verse 22**: "For the sake of his great name the LORD will not reject his people, because the LORD was pleased to make you his own." God bound Himself in a covenant when He adopted Israel as His own people. He could not revert His decision and un-love the Israelites. God's faithfulness will never change. Paul said in **2 Timothy 2:13** that: If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself. From the Old Testament to the New Testament, from everlasting to everlasting God remains faithful to us. Finally, in Samuel speech he assured the people that he would continue to give them counsel. He said in **verse 23**: "As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right." Although from now on Israel had a king Samuel's role as a prophet remained unchanged. He would intercede for the people, and would convey God's messages to them.

Despite the fact that the Israelites sinned by asking for a king God still promised to reward them if they followed after Him faithfully. Saul the new king had a choice, and so did the Israelites. In the subsequent three chapters we quickly realize what kind of king Saul turned out to be. He stepped outside of his role and presented offerings when he noticed that the enemies were coming, his army began to scatter and Samuel did not show up by the date he had promised. Next, Saul declared an unreasonable command that his soldiers were not allowed to eat until paying revenge to the Philistines. Saul was finally rejected by God after Israel's battle with the Amalekites. Saul did not obey God's order to destroy the enemies completely. Just like Saul we as a church also have a choice whether or not to follow God's Word. God promises to reward His faithful followers. Our coworkers sinned in 2014, then again this year. God is gracious to allow our church to exist to this day. When will we turn back to Him? Someone said: those who do not learn from history are destined to repeat the same mistakes. At the end of the Joint Board meeting last Sunday I was given the opportunity to share to the coworkers. Among other things I said I told them that God has given them huge responsibilities. It is important for them to make

wise decisions. We have to discern if we are doing men's things in God's way, or doing God's things men's way. After tomorrow I will no longer be your pastor. But whenever I think of you I will surely pray for you. There will still be challenges ahead. But God's reward is there for those who follow Him faithfully.

CONCLUSION

God is righteous, and He will deal with us according to the way we honor Him. Israel looked for a king, but no king could fully meet their expectations. In ancient Chinese history people were hoping to find a noble king to govern them. But no such king could be found. In U.S., every four years people look forward to the possibility of electing a good president who really cares about people's interest. It turns out that the voters are forced to pick the candidate with the fewest flaws. People are frustrated because there is no perfect leader in the world. We are expecting a ruler who genuinely loves his citizens, serves everyone selflessly, governs the country with infinite wisdom and brings never-ending peace, happiness and prosperity. All that longing can only be satisfied in Jesus Christ. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. Only in Him can we find abundant life.