

September 25, 2005

Romans 12:2

An Old Testament study of the creation of the Kingdom of Israel is particularly enlightening as we attempt to create a democracy out of the tribes that make up Iraq. Proceeding with our study we will skip the beautiful story of Ruth to follow the evolution of Israel from a people to a nation.

By the middle of the 11 Century B.C. the life of the tribes had changed from a wandering bunch of nomads to a people who had settled down to enjoy a life lived in permanent homes and towns. As they put down their roots, planted crops, grapes and olive trees they enjoyed a freedom from some of the uncertainties of the wilderness.

The door was closing on the age of the judges, heroes that rose up in time of need to lead the people into battle. The door was opening to the age of the prophets, those to whom God

spoke. Through these men we will hear the words *“Thus sayeth the Lord.”* It is on this threshold that we come to Samuel, last of the judges and first of the prophets.

In those days the religious center of Israel was in a tent shrine maintained in Shiloh. This tent housed the Ark of the Covenant that contained sacred objects and was the symbol of the presence of the invisible God. God had instructed the people at Sinai that they were to have no graven images, however I suspect that the Ark of the Covenant was just that.

Once a year the Jews gathered at Shiloh for religious ceremonies, offerings, and sacrifices. Elkanah and Hannah came to one of the observances. Hannah, as we so often find in the Old Testament, was barren. One day she slipped away from the group to make her own offerings to God. In making that offering she promised that if she had a son his life would be turned over to the Lord’s service.

She had a son. She named him Samuel. And after weaning Samuel was turned over to Eli the high priest of the Jews to be raised as a Nazirite. If you remember the hair of the Nazirite was not to be cut and he was to abstain from alcoholic beverages.

Eli was the high priest of the Jews. He was a revered old man. Unfortunately he had two sons that were pretty corrupt. I am sure that as Samuel participated in the religious rituals that he was brought face to face with the sons' corruption.

One night the boy Samuel lay down in preparation for sleep. A voice came to him, "**Samuel.**" Thinking it was the high priest Samuel went to him only to be sent back to bed. Three times this occurred and finally Eli told Samuel that the voice was the voice of the Lord and he was to answer. With the next call Samuel responded, "**Speak, Lord, thy servant heareth.**" A vision that followed revealed God's plans to

punish Eli and his two sons.

Shortly thereafter there was a major battle with the Philistines at Ebenezer. The Philistines turned on the Jews much like USC turned on Arkansas. The results were disastrous. Eli and his two sons were both killed. The Ark, the symbol of the presence of the invisible God, was captured by the Philistines. They hauled the Ark off to exhibit in their cities. The prize was more than the Philistines expected. Wherever the Ark went plagues occurred. There was the invasion of rats in one town. In another place a plague of boils. The Philistines finally loaded the Ark on a cart along with offerings of golden mice and golden boils. They hitched the oxen to the wagon. On their own the oxen carried the Ark to Shiloh.

The return of the Ark did not cure all of the Jews' troubles. Finally a delegation of the elders came to Samuel with the demand that he give them a king. Samuel, thinking that this was

a dissatisfaction with his leadership refused. God explained that it was not Samuel that the people were dissatisfied with but God and that Samuel should give them a king. Samuel tried to explain to the elders that a king would conscript their young men into the kings' service, tax them, restrict their freedoms, and subject them to all kinds of bureaucratic problems. A king they would have.

It ended up with Samuel anointing a handsome young member of the tribe of Benjamin, Saul, as their King. As the first King he was very successful. He led the Jews to victory in a number of battles. One of those battles was with the Amalekites. This conflict was a Heram, that is, a war in which you destroyed not just the enemy but all of the enemies' possessions. But Saul didn't do that. He captured their King, put him in irons and brought him home to show to the people. He also brought back their cattle. In explaining his action to

Samuel he said that he brought the cattle back as a sacrifice.

Samuel replied, ***“Has the Lord as great a delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord?”***

With that Samuel had them bring the King of the Amalekites to him. Samuel drew his sword and killed the king. He then turned and left the presence of Saul forever.

As we read of these great personalities of the Old Testament we read of the voice of God or the voice of angels directing them in the way God would have them go. Today we pray, ***“Thy will be done.”*** Yet no angels appear, we don't hear God's voice thundering down the mountain.

What do we mean, ***“God's will be done?”*** Are we asking that God use our life to do his will? Or, are we asking that God pull out his creative wand and magically make heaven on earth? In the Old Testament it seems like every time God spoke to man or an angel appeared it was to call man to do God's will.

How we will know God's will under a given set of circumstances? So far as I know no angel has ever appeared to me so am I on my own until one does? Maybe not. In her work, Aurare Leigh, Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes:

*“Earth’s crammed with heaven,
and every common bush afire with God;
And only he who takes off his shoes –
The rest sit around it and pick blackberries.”*

From birth Samuel had been trained in the ministry, the priesthood. He was attuned to the call of God. Not if it came, but when it came. The call came to the boy when he couldn't identify it. The call had to be repeated. Finally old Eli had to interpret it for him.

Maybe that says to us that if we are to hear God's call to us we have to discipline ourselves in the observances of our religion. That is not a revolutionary thought. We wouldn't want to be operated on by someone who had not studied the human body. We would not want an orchestra leader whose ear

was not attune to the music. To hear the voice of God we have to turn from blackberry picking and take off our shoes. We need to prepare.

We have spent the last couple of days listening to the forecast of when and where the hurricane would hit. As changing as the weather forecasters are they beat by a mile our ability to forecast the weather of life. Looking for ways to discover God's will for my life on a particular set of circumstances I turn to the experts. Who better than St. Paul, a man who has been there, knows that?

In his letter to the Roman's Paul writes: ***“Be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that what is good and acceptable and the perfect will of God.”***

God is a personality, we are a personality. God thinks, we think. In finding the will of God we have to put the two

together. There is no sense in God calling if we are asleep.

When the storms of life hit it is hard for us to be objective about it. We are too emotionally stretched to think about our problem in a detached fashion; that is as if we were not involved. The humanity in us wants to have it our way, to do what we think is best for us at the moment.

We start to find the will of God by doing our best to eliminate ourselves from our own selfish purpose. One way to do this, perhaps the most productive way, is to raise ourselves as far as our humanity will allow to seek objectively what the will of God is for us. We do this by prayer, opening our minds to the mind of God and letting the mind of God take over.

This is not an easy thing to do. Look at our savior Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Before him was suffering and the cross. He was faced with the decision to go on or to call a halt. He prayed about it, hard prayer, sweated blood. Three times he

tried to throw in the towel. In that third and final attempt the spirit won, *“Not that my will be done, but thine.”*

As we seek to find the will of God in the midst of our difficult situations we need to think; think as deeply as we can. In one's solitude give the problem one's deepest and best thoughts. We lay the problem before God in prayer. We open our minds by deep thoughts and God's thoughts will come over to our heart. Once we have made the effort to be objective, have opened our mind to God, we can trust our best and highest thoughts. Take the next best step that the heart tells us to take.

*“Columbus found the world, and had no chart,
Save one that faith deciphered in the sky;
To trust the soul's invincible surmise
Was all his science and his only art.”*

Like Columbus and untold others we are to travel with the faith that God will direct the successful steps in our life. Samuel did that and to me that is the practical message that comes from his life. A message that will enable us to

find the life more abundant. A life lived above the troubles that the flesh is heir to. Or as Paul puts it, *“Be made over from within that you may find what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”*

Pastor's Message

Every man must at last fight the battles of his life with his own equipment however simple it may be. The truth is, the spiritual equipment necessary for meeting the issues of life are within the reach of everyone. When David was going up against Goliath, Saul the King sought to dress him in his armor. The shepherd boy quickly saw that it did not fit and rejected it. He went forth to battle and to victory with a faith in God and his sling, a simple weapon which was his own.

In the crucial moments of one's life, it is personal religion that counts. Memorized creeds, ritualistic exercises and hearsay procedures do not fit and are of little avail. Use the faith in God that you have, speak your prayers in your own language and apply your own best reasoning and insights. Too many people are afraid to trust a religious experience for themselves. They think they have to be religious like some loved one or an admired personality. Religious experience is like an armor or dress. Howsoever attractive or appropriate for the other person it does not quite “fit” someone else. St. Paul wisely enjoins us: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” In the process God works with us and our salvation is a personal accomplishment with God.

PRAYER

Eternal God, I am but a little person and my gifts and skills are small. Help me to make my stand in life's battle with the little that I am and have with the faith that thou standest with me and will make effective unto victory as I dedicate all to thee. Amen.