

October 2, 2005

## **Samuel 15**

First there were Judges, then Prophets and with the Prophet Samuel's anointing of Saul, now a King. In our own time we see a constitution growing out of a federation of states. The power of the Executive Branch of government rises and falls with each administration. Today we witness the rise of judges as the rule making power. What goes around comes around.

The writers of the early history of the Jewish monarchy tell us that God, acting through his prophet Samuel, chose Saul to be the first king of Israel. This did not abolish the office or influence of prophet. The prophets came in and out of Jewish history over the next several one hundred years.

Saul was a warrior leader. Under his leadership Israel defeated many of the people who sought to do them in.

Last week as we looked at Samuel, the last of the Judges

and first of the Prophets, we talked about Saul's great victory over the Amalekites. God had instructed Saul, through Samuel, that Saul was to ***“utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.”*** Contrary to these instructions Saul took Agag the King of the Amalekites alive and spared the best of the cattle. When Samuel found out he went ballistic. After hacking King Agag to pieces Samuel told Saul, ***“Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being King.”*** And Samuel left Saul for good.

I've got to stop and ask, *“What is going on here?”* In the Christmas story King Herod is presented to us as the essence of evil arising out of orders that all male children under the age of two be put to the sword. It is a horrible story. We read about the terrible wars in Africa where the stronger group seeks to kill off everybody in the weaker tribe. Stalin ordered the death of

thousands. Hitler was intent on exterminating all of the Jews.

And so it goes. These are stories of man at his worst and it turns our stomach.

Now we read where God orders that Saul carry out the same programs that shock us. Is this right? – Is this the God I worship?

We could well dismiss this event out of the life of Saul as Jewish folklore but that doesn't cut it. How do we explain AIDS, war or natural disasters that take the life of the young as well as the old, good as well as the bad, church people as well as unchurched people. This event out of the life of Saul deserves more than just a reading. The past is forever speaking to us. We listen to it because we cannot help ourselves. It speaks to us with many voices; it falls on many ears.

God, through Samuel, told Saul he was to eliminate the enemy and destroy all of his possessions. To follow this command would result in a two fold advantage to the Jews.

First, it would eliminate an enemy. Second it would serve as an example to others who would seek war with Israel. ***“Don’t tread on me, see what will happen to your women and children if you lose, better think twice.”***

Perplexed by this story I turn to the commentary in the Interpreter’s Bible. The opinion there is that Saul spared Agag and the cattle because he was selfish. That is he disobeyed God because he was selfish. I don’t buy that argument, maybe because of a concern for the worried, frantic king that got hacked to death. Maybe the commentator was referring to a selfish Saul who sought public praise from exhibiting a captured king. Maybe from the desires of Saul to increase his own flock.

Coming out of the clouds of the past I see it so much in my disobedience as a result of my selfishness. A good place to start our thoughts. At least it gives us a chance to get away from the horror of god’s command to Saul.

The Jews thought they could save their union, their way of

life, by a change in government. As we have so dramatically witnessed these past few weeks the world, our world, will not be saved by government. History tells us over and over again that all governments are corrupt, some more so than others, but corrupt never the less.

History also tells us that the world will not be reformed by government. Our only salvation lies in individual and personal religion. Salvation of the world will be the product of individuals who have committed themselves to the Christ like life. With this we turn to the selfishness that the Interpreter's Bible lays on Saul as his motive for saving the choice cattle.

A person's inner qualities are the means to measure the value of a person, not his material possessions. In Matthew we hear Jesus say, "*A man's life consists, not in the abundance of the things he possesseth.*" I don't think that Jesus condemns a person because he is rich. We read the parable of the talents and we get the impression that Jesus had an admiration for the

person who got out and worked hard and achieved financial stability. What we get out of Jesus' teachings is that possessions are to be secondary in a person's life because he is to be judged by the quality of the man inside, not the showman on the outside. There is no reason why a man cannot accumulate possessions and be rich in his spiritual life. Materials things are transitory while the spiritual is eternal.

I bought a 20 year bond the other day knowing I won't be around to cash it in. And that is true of everything we possess. To realize that there may not be a tomorrow is to hear the ancient truth, "*And whose shall those things be that thou has possessed.*"

Other than the food we eat and the pills we take we don't own anything. All we have in material things is the use while we are here. One of the advantages of growing older is the realization that we don't need so much of what we work so hard to accumulate.

In the early days of my law practice we were called upon to review abstracts of titles and issue opinion as to the ownership of particular pieces of property. This was a dull task that was ultimately taken over by title insurance companies. Page by crumpled page told the story of the title to land passing from one individual to the next. The individuals passed on but the land was still there. That practice reminds one that, *“Naked we come into the world and naked we go out.”*

I don't read this event as evidence of Saul's selfishness as we normally think of it. I see this as a turning point in the life of Saul. One of those dramatic events that make or break a person. I wish the circumstances had been different, that God's commandments had not been so horrible. But, as the old farmer said, *“I'll plow with the mules that I've got.”*

It's not often in our life that we come to that one climatic moment that makes or breaks us. Our spiritual destiny is made or broken by how we handle each day. The moral quality of our

life is usually determined by how we separate right from wrong each day. Christianity is designed to help us meet the needs of everyday life.

In one of his sermons, Jesus noted that we apply common sense when it comes to forecasting the weather. So why can't we apply that same common sense to decide what is right and what is wrong? When it comes to interpreting the weather we are aided by the clouds, the wind and passed experience. When it comes to right or wrong there are a number of principles to guide us such as: the test of publicity and exposure; the test of experience; the long run prospect test; the what if everybody did it test; the effect of our actions on the innocent; the test of our best self and ultimately the teachings of Jesus Christ.

The other day I asked a friend how he was doing. His reply, *"Well I wasn't named on the front page of this morning's paper or listed in the obituaries, so I guess I am doing okay."* We require our public bodies to hold open in



public meetings. Let the sunshine in is a good test. Most evil things are done in secret. If they were exposed to the light of public scrutiny they wouldn't be done. We know from experience the truth of the moral law. The importance of the Ten Commandments is not that they come from God so much as the fact that they are confirmed everyday by human experience. Two plus two will always make four and payday will surely come. It may not seem so at the moment. Take a little liberty with the moral law and it might get us through the moment but what about the long run. It is the long run that tells the tale.

There is the *“What if everybody acted that way”* test. When we decide to act we need to ask ourselves, *“What if everybody behaved as I am going to?”* *“What if everybody shaved a bit off of his income tax; what if everybody ran the stop sign?”*

When the action I am about to take comes to life how will it affect my family and friends? When faced with the moral

choices of life we must remember that we have a responsibility to the innocent. We may receive a benefit from cooking the corporate books but what about those stockholders depending on their investment to aid their daily life.

In each one of us is that call to our highest and best. We ignore that call at our peril. Listening to that call will lead to the right action for us to take.

Finally we have the life, the voice and the experiences of Christ to guide us. Life's moral choices can always be measured by the spirit and teachings of Jesus. When all other tests fail we are to put our actions against the yardstick that is Jesus. That yardstick should bring us the right answer loud and clear.

Maybe Saul's actions were selfish, maybe not. Maybe it is all a tale developed over the years, maybe not. Whatever, it serves as a spring board for thought as we face the daily issues that in the long run will make or break our life.

Samuel left Saul after the events we just talked about. I don't want us to do the same. There is more to come out of Saul's life that will help us find the more abundant life today and eternal life tomorrow.

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A SELECTION OF PASTORAL ESSAYS

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If one would really face up to the solemn facts of human life, let him attend a public sale of the effects of the lately deceased.

To begin with, such a disposal is sensible and necessary. Most of the "things" of life are meaningful only to the person concerned. When he passes beyond use of the things of personal concern, it is fitting that they shall be possessed by those who can use them.

The first and most important fact which emerges is the vanity and folly of piling up, accumulating, and hoarding either money or things beyond the limits of the comfort and use of the person concerned and his sense of obligation or affection for those who shall survive him. In the overall story, inherited wealth has damned many more than it has blessed. It is best that one use what he has as he goes along.

A second lesson which stands out is the ancient truth that a man's life is a stewardship, a trusteeship, a temporary trust. In a real sense, no man owns anything. He only has possession for a season.

Lastly, the most valuable and abiding effects which one leaves behind are the spiritual influences of the life he lived and the deeds he did. The spiritual influence of a man's life in the world is like a pebble dropped on the surface of a body of water. The ripples affect the furthest shore. A.S. Eddington observed that a baby dropping its rattle over the side of its cradle to that extent upsets the equilibrium of the universe. In this same sense does the life of every man, howsoever obscure he may be, affect the whole stream of human life. This is the awful, inescapable responsibility that comes with being born into the world.