

Lesson 11: Samuel and Saul (Judges, 1 Sam 1-15)

After 40 years in the wilderness Joshua leads Israel across the Jordan River into the Promised Land and the twelve tribes of Israel begin to take their allotted portion of the land of Canaan.²⁷² However, they do not clear out all of the tribes from the land as Moses commanded. Different Canaanite tribes remain, like the Philistines, even unto the time of David.

The Israelites entered the Promised Land without fully purifying themselves from their attachment to pagan idolatry and once again they fall into the same old sins. This is in part because families failed to instruct their children in the ways of the Lord, and in part because they failed to completely drive out the Canaanites from the Promised Land. The Canaanites worshipped Baal, the god of the rains and harvest, and Ashtoreth, the goddess of fertility. The Israelites were likely attracted to these cults, succumbing to the desire to find security in something other than reliance on God. If this was not enough, the Twelve Tribes of Israel take different sections of Canaan for themselves and they begin to act independently of one another. Rather than staying as a unified nation, they begin to squabble among themselves, which weakens each tribe and the entire nation, making Israel vulnerable to other nations. This, as we will see, is the beginning of more problems for the Israelites.

The Judges and Samuel's Calling

We learned in the last chapter that serving the Lord depends on knowing Him. The generation of Israelites that conquered the Promised Land finally knows Yahweh and serves Him.²⁷³ All the suffering that their ancestors endured bore the fruit of their faith. Unfortunately, they did not pass this knowledge onto their children and when Joshua dies the next generation “did not know the Lord or the work which he had done for Israel.”²⁷⁴ Just as in a relay race, if the baton is not passed on to the next runner, then the race is lost. Because the next generation did not know the Lord, they become slaves. Because they did not know the Law of Moses and were not formed in character and virtue, they gave themselves over to the seduction of their passions and the lure of pleasure and they succumbed to sin; and sin always leads to slavery and to exile. They had come so far and had endured so many trials in their forty years of wandering, yet now, all seems lost! Israel was literally in a state of anarchy since “every man did what was right in his own eyes.”²⁷⁵ A social order that is based on subjective self-interest can only fall into a lawless culture of the strong governing the weak. Now, just as in Egypt, the Israelites were once again oppressed, only this time by the Philistines.²⁷⁶ Yet God hears their cry and sends twelve “saviors” to liberate them from their slavery. These twelve are the Judges. Each Judge takes Israel to task for the sins of the nation, calling Israel to return to the Lord. In His mercy, God sends the judges to remind them of their identity. They

²⁷² see Joshua 13-19

²⁷³ Judges 2:6-9

²⁷⁴ Judges 2:10

²⁷⁵ Judges 21:25

²⁷⁶ The Philistines were one of the pagan nations bordering Canaan to the west. The Greek word *Palaistine* (“land of the *pelestim*”) came to mean the entire land of Canaan, which is where we get the name “Palestine.”

were not called by God to simply receive the Promised Land, they were called out by God to live as His sons and daughters and by this means be a witness that would lead all the other younger brother and sister nations to know and serve Yahweh. The last of the judges is Samuel, who plays a unique role among the judges and in Israel's history.

There is a woman named Hannah who was barren. She prays to God for a son and vows to give "him to the Lord all the days of his life."²⁷⁷ God answers her prayer and she names him Samuel.²⁷⁸ Hannah takes Samuel to the Ark of the Covenant and dedicates him to the Lord.²⁷⁹ The fidelity of Hannah is striking: the only son of hers, the miraculous fruit of a barren womb, is offered up to the Lord in trust. Yahweh is not to be outdone in generosity. God visits Hannah again and she has three more sons, and two daughters!²⁸⁰ Often times we are afraid to offer ourselves completely to the service of the Lord because we think that this offering means that God will take our offering and we will be left barren without anything. These are selfish temptations that come from our fallen state and the influence of the devil. One of the effects of the fall is that we do not naturally trust that God alone satisfies, that He will take care of us better than we can take care of ourselves. Detachment from created goods does not mean that God takes away from us, but rather, that our hearts are free and open to receive even more of His blessings. God gives good gifts to hearts that are pure and free.

At this time in Israel the voice of God is not highly valued.²⁸¹ It is not that God is not interested in Israel, but that Israel is distracted with their new life in Canaan, and have yet again forgotten their responsibility to pass on the faith. Even Samuel does not yet know the Lord, despite the fact that he lives where the Ark of the Covenant is kept.²⁸² Even Eli, a priest of the Lord, to whom Samuel had been entrusted, appears to have failed in his duty to pass the faith on to Samuel. So we see that simply because God consecrates someone to His ministry does not mean that the person will always freely choose to perform his or her tasks well. This is perhaps the greatest cause of scandal and results in widespread loss of faith.²⁸³ And yet when God calls Samuel, Samuel responds in loving obedience.

The account of Samuel's calling (vocation) is a good example of how God calls someone to a special mission.²⁸⁴ God takes the initiative, using people and circumstances, but will not force us to do anything. We must respond with trust and obedience if we are to be faithful to our calling. Samuel is lying down in the temple where "the lamp of God had

²⁷⁷ 1 Samuel 1:11

²⁷⁸ Hannah is a model of the devout woman who perseveres in prayer. Saint Cyprian says, Hannah is "a symbol of the Church which carries the Lord. Her prayer is not clamorous, rather it is calm and refined; she prays in the depths of her heart because she knows that God listens to her there." (*De oratione dominica*, #5)

²⁷⁹ The Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10) is a beautiful psalm in praise of God's saving action. It is the inspiration for the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55), which is prayed in the life of the Church every evening. Hannah is the source of Samuel's faith and formation, see CCC, #2578.

²⁸⁰ 1 Samuel 2:21

²⁸¹ 1 Samuel 3:1

²⁸² 1 Samuel 3:7

²⁸³ CCC, #29

²⁸⁴ 1 Samuel 3:1-21

not yet gone out.”²⁸⁵ Then God calls him, and even though Samuel does not know what is happening, he offers himself and says, “Here I am, for you have called me.”²⁸⁶ God responds by giving Samuel his mission, “Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel, at which the two ears of every one that hears it will tingle...”²⁸⁷

Samuel grows in holiness because he does not let the word of the Lord “fall to the ground.”²⁸⁸ In other words, through meditation, Samuel makes God’s word active. This is a valuable insight into making God’s word fruitful in our lives. Often times our prayer may not be as effective as we would wish because we do not carry from our meditation a practical resolution and a vigilance to carry out that resolution. Samuel let none of the Lord’s words fall to the ground. Not only must we spend time every day in meditation, but we must also draw a concrete resolution from our meditation and put it into practice, examining ourselves at the end of the day to see how well we have done in carrying it out. In this way, we, too, will not let one of God’s words fall to the ground fruitless. Samuel is often considered a model of obedience, and as such, a figure of Christ who submits himself fully to the will of the Father.²⁸⁹

“We Want A King”

In the mess of a fractured nation and the mixing of paganism back into Israel, there is a general acknowledgment that things must change. In their weakness, Israel is overtaken by the Philistines and has lost the freedom Yahweh offered them.²⁹⁰ Instead of turning back to Yahweh, however, Israel want to be like the other nations and desire a king to rule over them. They believe the cause of their plight to be that Yahweh is no longer caring for them. If only they have a king to unite them, so they think, they will be able to stand up to the Philistines and other nations. They do not realize that they already have a king in Yahweh who protects them better than any human power. Through human means, they believe that they can consolidate their power and take care of themselves better than Yahweh. They no longer trust God nor seek His help.

“Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel and said to him, ‘Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations.’ But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, ‘Give us a king to govern us.’ And Samuel prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Hearken to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them...Now then, hearken to their voice; only, you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who

²⁸⁵ This is an image of the presence of God that continues today with the sanctuary candle next to the tabernacle twenty-four hours a day.

²⁸⁶ 1 Samuel 3:8; Saint Gregory the Great says, “This young boy gives us an example of the highest form of obedience. True obedience does not question the meaning of what is commanded, not does it judge, since he who decides to practice perfect obedience renounces his own judgment.” (*In primum Regnum*, 2, 4, 10-11)

²⁸⁷ 1 Samuel 3:11-14; God is clear that He will bring punishment upon Israel for their faithlessness. The phrase “your ears will tingle” is an idiom for severe punishment.

²⁸⁸ 1 Samuel 3:19

²⁸⁹ cf. Philippians 2:8

²⁹⁰ 1 Samuel 4-7

shall reign over them.”²⁹¹ The elders of Israel come to Samuel, whom is recognized as a political figure, and demand that he appoint for them a king. Their rationale seems reasonable in that Samuel’s sons are not capable of filling his shoes.²⁹² God instructs Samuel to do as they want, but to warn them of the evils that will come with a temporal king.²⁹³ Samuel tells the people that a king will oppress them with heavy taxes and military service, and take away their freedom. Even with the warning the people still want a king to rule over them.

Israel’s desire for a king is not just a desire for some political authority, but it is a rejection of God and His representatives on earth. Prior to the establishment of a temporal king God invested His authority with Moses, then Joshua, then the Judges. Through these mediating instruments, Yahweh reveals the way in which He relates and commands His people: God governs His people through appointed ministers. This is fulfilled in the Church, the new Israel, in the New Testament. There is a true Kingdom of God on earth and Jesus is the King. He reigns from heaven, yet has appointed Peter and the Apostles to govern the Church until the end of time via their successors—the Pope and bishops in union with him.

Israel wants a political and military king to lead them into battle, in part because they have forgotten God’s previous saving action. At this time, Israel consisted of twelve loosely connected tribes in Canaan. However, if one of the tribes suffered invasion, it was difficult to gain the support of the other tribes to help them in battle. The people of Israel thought that a worldly king was needed to create a cohesive military unity. Only an earthly king could unite twelve independent tribes into one military force to defeat the Philistines. This is the beginning of a monarchy that will come to define the rest of salvation history.

The Israelites do not listen to the warnings of Samuel, and everything he foretells comes to pass. The kings of Israel will eventually be their undoing as a nation. And yet, God brings good from evil. This is the secret to God’s plan. Even though it seems as though His original plan failed, God uses Israel’s abuse of its freedom and accomplishes His plan through it anyway. St. Thomas Aquinas says that God permits evil because He is capable of drawing forth some greater good.²⁹⁴ God, therefore, accepts Israel’s decision to have a king, and he leads Samuel to find and consecrate a king for His people. He will bring an even greater good from this evil; He will bring the true King of Israel, the King of Heaven, to reign forever. God himself will become Incarnate and be born of the line of David.

²⁹¹ 1 Samuel 8:4-9

²⁹² 1 Samuel 8:3

²⁹³ 1 Samuel 8:10-18

²⁹⁴ CCC, #412; This is an essential point to understanding God’s ways. He is so powerful that He can take our mistakes and turn them inside out if we ourselves turn back to Him with humble hearts. We must have the faith that God will turn our “sorrows into joy” and bring about good from evil.

The First King of Israel: Saul

In search for a king, God leads Samuel to Saul, who is from the Tribe of Benjamin.²⁹⁵ Saul looks the part, as he is tall and strong in stature. Saul, however, has no idea what God has in mind for him. In fact, Saul approaches Samuel simply for counsel about some lost livestock. Over dinner Samuel gives Saul the surprise of his life and anoints him king over Israel. Through the anointing the Spirit comes upon Saul and he prophecies.²⁹⁶

To be anointed in Hebrew means to be “messiahed.” Messiah means “Anointed One,” which is a direct reference to a king.²⁹⁷ This is what happens to the Christian in the sacrament of confirmation. Each of us is anointed as a priest (to offer the sacrifice of our lives), prophet (to witness to the faith), and king (to rule over and master our disordered desires). The Holy Spirit of God comes down upon us mightily. We are consecrated, set apart, for God’s Kingdom. We fulfill a role suited uniquely for us that is lived out in the ordinariness of life. We receive the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit to carry out our calling of holiness amidst the world. We are called to perfect our state in life – to make heroic prose out of ordinary verse.

God gives Saul a mission and gives him the capacity to fulfill the mission by giving him the gift of the Holy Spirit. Saul goes on to achieve great success by the power of the Holy Spirit. He leads Israel to all kinds of military victories. However, he is mastered by pride in the form of presumption and reliance on himself. His trust in himself reveals that he does not really believe that the Lord is the source of his success. Pride is the foolish posture radical autonomy and independence from God. It is a great lie, as we are incapable of doing anything apart from God.²⁹⁸ Humility is the opposite of pride as it is the radical dependence on God based on the true knowledge of one’s own poverty. Jesus calls us to depend on God the way a little child depends on his mother.²⁹⁹

Saul’s Grave Sins

As king, Saul is both political leader and mediator between God and the people. Sadly, Saul does not act as a righteous servant of the Lord and credits himself for his military victories.³⁰⁰ In a battle against the Philistines (who greatly outmatch Israel) God tells Saul that He will lead Israel to victory, Saul need only be patient and wait on Samuel to offer sacrifice. Instead, Saul offers the sacrifice himself before Samuel arrives.³⁰¹ Saul demonstrates a fundamental failure in trust and obedience. As a consequence he is told, “your kingdom shall not continue.”³⁰² That is, Saul’s sons will not receive his political power. Saul is stripped of a political dynasty. This is reminiscent of the consequences of

²⁹⁵ 1 Samuel 9:1-2; 15-17

²⁹⁶ 1 Samuel 10:10

²⁹⁷ The word “Christ” comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah.” See CCC #436. Christ avoids this term for him until the week of the Passion because he knows that there can be only one king and once he is referred to as the King of the Jews he will be set up as the rival to the temporal king. This is what leads to his crucifixion.

²⁹⁸ cf. John 15:5

²⁹⁹ cf. Mt 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16

³⁰⁰ 1 Samuel 13:4

³⁰¹ 1 Samuel 13:8-14

³⁰² 1 Samuel 13:14

the first sin of Adam and Eve when the kingdom of the Garden was taken away from them.³⁰³ The lesson is clear: failure in trust and obedience is a serious sin that leads to a breaking of the unique relationship between man and God.³⁰⁴

Saul follows up with another sin of disobedience. God command Saul to attack and wipe out Amalek. Amalek has been a thorn in the side of Israel for generations and would attack the weakest and most vulnerable of Israel.³⁰⁵ The universal moral code demands the defense of the most defenseless, so God commands Saul to defeat Amalek and totally wipe out their economic goods.³⁰⁶ Saul obeys and defeats the Amalekites, but he spares Agag, the king of the Amalekites, and the best of the sheep and oxen.³⁰⁷ Saul likely saves Agag because a captured king in the ancient world could be held for ransom and brings great fortune to the victors. This is all well and good, but it is not what God commanded.³⁰⁸ Saul even goes so far as to set up a monument to himself since he thinks he is the reason Israel is victorious.³⁰⁹ In essence, Saul sets himself in place of God. And to add insult to injury, when Samuel confronts Saul on his sin, Saul lies to Samuel, saying he kept the livestock to sacrifice to Yahweh.³¹⁰

Needless to say, God is not happy. “The word of the Lord came to Samuel: ‘I repent that I have made Saul king; for he has turned back from following me, and has not performed my commandments.’”³¹¹ Samuel’s response to Saul is quite revealing. “Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel?”³¹² Samuel’s point is clear: Saul thinks too lowly of himself when he sells out so marvelous and lasting a gift as eternal life for a simple monument made of stone, which now is gone and forgotten. Hence, Saul is indeed little in his own eyes, setting his sites too low. He misses the fact that he is a Son of God (provided he keep the covenant). No matter the worldly accolades and prestige we amass for ourselves, no matter how much wealth or how much pleasure, no matter how great we think that we have made our name, it is worthless when done apart from the Lord. Saul’s wealth is much greater now but he has lost the only true treasure.³¹³

Samuel finishes with this beautiful encapsulation of that which pleases Yahweh:

Is the pleasure of Yahweh in holocausts and sacrifices
Or in obedience to the voice of Yahweh?
Yes, obedience is better than sacrifice,

³⁰³ Genesis 3:13, 23

³⁰⁴ see CCC, #386

³⁰⁵ see Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-19

³⁰⁶ If God expects Israel to protect the most vulnerable among them, what does God expect from us today when the most vulnerable, the unborn, are so seriously threatened?

³⁰⁷ 1 Samuel 15:7-9

³⁰⁸ 1 Samuel 15:3

³⁰⁹ 1 Samuel 15:12

³¹⁰ 1 Samuel 15:15

³¹¹ 1 Samuel 15:10

³¹² 1 Samuel 15:17

³¹³ Mark 8:36

Submissiveness better than the fat of rams.
Rebellion is the sin of sorcery,
And stubbornness is the sin of idolatry.
Since you have rejected the word of the Lord,
He has also rejected you as king.³¹⁴

We have here an important lesson in obedience. Obedience is the most perfect form of divine worship, even more perfect than offering sacrifice. Conversely, disobedience is essentially an act of idolatry – putting your will over the will of our Creator and Father. This is why the Church has always placed a premium on the life of obedience within the rule of religious communities. We learn humility and trust when we submit our will to the will of the Church. This is not to say that we should be blindly following the Church, but that we should be willing to submit our judgments to the mind of the Church since it is in and through the Church that God continues to reveal Himself.

Through the fall of Saul, we learn a great lesson about leadership. The temptation for leaders is to give in to the will of the people – to give the people what they want. Saul is king, but he said that he “feared the voice of the people and transgressed the commandment of God.”³¹⁵ He felt the pressure of the people and thus compromised his fidelity to God to keep his popularity. And yet, how popular is he now? This is a temptation for anyone who is placed in a position of leadership. Our calling is to be paternal or maternal, father or mother to the people placed in our care, not to be their buddy. We must fight the temptation to lower God’s expectations down to the level of popular acceptance.

Aristotle, the famous Greek philosopher, conveyed a similar idea as Samuel’s words, placing them in his own context. He said that people who fall short of magnanimity stand back from noble actions, deeming themselves unworthy. The magnanimous person acknowledges the call to rise to the occasion, which is part of every person’s universal call to holiness. To offer a heroic ‘yes’ to our call takes magnanimity; it also takes our willingness to accept who we are – children of God! Magnanimity does not shrink from glory. It is a striving for excellence, a reaching out towards greatness, but not just any greatness, only that greatness that seeks to glorify God rather than self. That is what distinguishes it from vainglory. Saint Irenaeus said, “The Glory of God is man fully alive.”³¹⁶ God indeed wants us to shine, but to shine with His life so that we may fulfill the purpose for which we were created, that is, to show forth the goodness and glory of our heavenly Father.

³¹⁴ 1 Samuel 15:22-23

³¹⁵ 1 Samuel 15:24

³¹⁶ Saint Irenaeus, *Adversus haeres* 4, 20, 7. See CCC #294.