

SAMUEL'S STAND FOR FREEDOM

by Jim Jess

The biblical record in I Samuel Chapter 8 is one that has significant lessons that can be applied by any group of people who desire to live in freedom. It is an excellent illustration of what happens when men reject the wisdom of God and rely solely on their limited human understanding. Although what we will examine happened several thousand years ago, this foundational record concerning civil government offers some tremendous learning for us today.

In this article, we will see the importance of loving God above all else, of keeping God first in our hearts. We will also see how trusting God can allow people to avoid fear and the snares that are the result of fear, which is negative believing. These principles work for individuals as well as for groups of people who apply them, including citizens of cities, states or nations. When an individual or a group of people practices these great truths, they experience freedom, as well as many other blessings in life.

Before we look at I Samuel 8 in detail, it is important to understand the standards that God had set for Israel in Old Testament times. Jesus Christ was quite aware of these standards in his day. In fact, God's only-begotten son spoke of one of the great standards by which the Israelite believers of that time were to live.

Matthew 22:37, 38:

Jesus said unto him [a man he was speaking with], Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.
This is the first and great commandment.

This "first and great commandment" was known in Old Testament times as well. It was part of the Mosaic Law.

Deuteronomy 6:4-6:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God *is* one Lord.
And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.
And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart;

Each Israelite was to follow the "first and great commandment," to love God with all their heart, soul and might, with all their being, all their mind. Their lives were to glorify God and manifest his love and goodness to others.

In this record in I Samuel 8, we see how the people of Israel disobeyed this commandment by not following the one true God with all their heart. They turned away from the great freedom they had known and started down the path to slavery. Even in this critical situation, however, God provided a solution.

Mistakes such as this one continue to plague mankind today. At times, corruption may infect a government; the people may lose their sense of responsibility or their love of freedom; or fear may take hold of the popular will. A close examination of the eighth chapter of I Samuel and several other relevant scriptures will document a progression of events in ancient Israel and provide us with an enlightened understanding of some fundamental principles of life that influence the functioning of a society and how its government functions.

I Samuel 8:1-3:

And it came to pass, when Samuel was old, that he made his sons judges over Israel.
Now the name of his firstborn was Joel; and the name of his second, Abiah: they were judges in Beer-sheba.
And his sons walked not in his ways, but turned aside after lucre, and took bribes, and perverted judgment.

These verses refer to a time late in the life of the great prophet Samuel. Samuel judged Israel nearly all of his adult life. As judge, he was the spiritual leader of Israel, one who led by example and teaching.

As the acknowledged spiritual leader, he also held governmental authority.¹ He was God's spokesman for his time. But his sons, who also held governmental responsibility, "walked not in his ways." There was corruption in the government because his sons took bribes.

The leaders of Israel in Samuel's time demanded a change. They were angry with the corruption they saw in their government and wanted a change in their governing institutions.

I Samuel 8:4, 5:

Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah, And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.

It seems odd that the elders did not ask Samuel to simply remove his sons from positions of authority and appoint others who would serve uprightly. They had their reasons for this request, as we shall see later. In this instance, they used the corruption as an excuse to fundamentally change their governmental institutions. Israel had a system of tribal government, in which elders administered local government and a spiritual leader provided leadership for the entire nation. But now the elders sought to lodge the authority of government in a monarchy headed by a king. Under a king, individuals and the tribes would have less power, because the king would be free to exercise authority in local matters – as well as in national matters – as he so chose. The tribes would also have less power because the king would have the major responsibility for military affairs and national defense. Tribal governments would still handle most local governmental affairs, but the Bible does not record that the elders requested any specific limits to the authority of the king in local matters.

From a human standpoint this progression of events is understandable: everybody else had a king. But more disturbing was the elders' rejection of God's will for how Israel was to function as a nation of God's chosen people. The mind-set of the elders of Israel was rather upsetting to Samuel. He recognized the beauty of how God had watched over Israel, and how the children of Israel were free to serve God. He knew that life would be different under a king. And God told Samuel what to say to the people in order to give them the opportunity to reconsider what they were requesting.

Samuel prayed to God, and God told him: "Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them." (Verse 7)

The people had broken the first and great commandment: they failed to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. They failed to keep God first, and rejected Him for a worldly institution, a king. But it would be some time before Samuel would actually confront them on this matter. At this point, he proceeded to convince them that a king would bring oppression and economic burdens. What Samuel said would happen under a king came to pass, because God had shown him what would occur. God told Samuel to "protest solemnly unto them, and shew them the manner of the king that shall reign over them." (Verse 9)

Verses 10-18:

And Samuel told all the words of the Lord unto the people that asked of him a king.

And he said, This will be the manner of the king that shall reign over you: He will take your sons, and appoint *them* for himself, for his chariots, and *to be* his horsemen; and *some* shall run before his chariots.

And he will appoint him captains over thousands, and captains over fifties; and *will set them* to ear his ground, and to reap his harvest, and to make his instruments of war, and instruments of his chariots.

And he will take your daughters *to be* confectionaries, and *to be* cooks, and *to be* bakers.

And he will take your fields, and your vineyards, and your oliveyards, *even the best of them*, and give *them* to his servants.

And he will take the tenth of your seed, and of your vineyards, and give to his officers, and to his servants.

And he will take your menservants, and your maidservants, and your goodliest young men, and your asses, and put *them* to his work.

He will take the tenth of your sheep: and ye shall be his servants.

And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen you; and the Lord will not hear you in that day.

Samuel told the people everything God had told him to tell them. Notice that instead of an individual having first claim to the control of his property and the fruits of his labor, the king would have first claim to everything, because he could take "the best of them."

True justice and sound ethics demand that a citizen have control over the fruits of his labor. However, if citizens consent to allow their government to use a portion of the fruits of their labor, such as taxes, to promote the common welfare and provide certain services to the society, then an agreement by the free-will consent of the citizens exists. Monarchies are not well known for the protection of the rights of the individual, and they have been quite oppressive at times. The key is that the people should consent or agree that their government should act on their behalf with the good of the community in mind.

Sadly, the people of Israel were blind to Samuel's warnings. Obviously, they wanted a monarch, a king, to make decisions for them, to be responsible for the army and for protecting them. They did not realize or understand that the rule of a king would at times interfere with their otherwise unencumbered service to the one true God, nor did they consider that God had the ability to protect them without a king.

Verses 19, 20:

Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, Nay; but we will have a king over us;

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.

This is another indication that the people's focus was not on serving God and living under His divine rule. Their attention was focused on a human institution that they felt would accomplish something for them. In situations in the past, when the children of Israel had needed help, God had met their need, even in military conflicts. Both Moses and Joshua, in carrying out God's guidance, had led the Israelites to military victory.

Exodus 14:13, 14, 24, 25:

And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will shew to you to day: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever.

The Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace.

And it came to pass, that in the morning watch the Lord looked unto the host of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and of the cloud, and troubled the host of the Egyptians,

And took off their chariot wheels, that they drave them heavily: so that the Egyptians said, Let us flee from the face of Israel; for the Lord fighteth for them against the Egyptians.

Joshua 10:13b, 14:

So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day.

And there was no day like that before it or after it, that the Lord hearkened unto the voice of a man: for the Lord fought for Israel.

Joshua 10:40-42:

So Joshua smote all the country of the hills, and of the south, and of the vale, and of the springs, and all their kings...

And Joshua smote them from Kadesh-barnea even unto Gaza, and all the country of Goshen, even unto Gibeon.

And all these kings and their land did Joshua take at one time, because the Lord God of Israel fought for Israel.

In these instances, God fought Israel's battles and the children of Israel were victorious. But the people wanted a king to do this instead. The people in I Samuel 8 rejected God's goodness and protection and desired a human institution, a king. They must have been convinced that a man could do a better job than God.

The Bible teaches that the worship of other gods is idolatry. In this record, the people turned away from the true God, but they were not yet to the point of following other gods. In fact, in the law, Moses had written by revelation several centuries earlier of this exact event in Israel's development, and God had provided a pathway of deliverance for His people so they could continue to serve Him. God's solution required the king to walk with God according to His laws. It may not have been the freest course of action for the people, but it provided a method for training and nurturing godly leadership so men who would love, respect and follow God and His Word could continue to lead God's people.

Deuteronomy 17:14-20:

When thou art come into the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein, and shalt say, I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that *are* about me; Thou shalt in any wise set *him* king over thee, whom the Lord thy God shall choose: *one* from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee: thou mayest not set a stranger over thee, which is not thy brother. But he shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses: forasmuch as the Lord hath said unto you, Ye shall henceforth return no more that way.

Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away: neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold.

And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this law in a book out of *that which is* before the priests the Levites:

And it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them:

That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, *to* the right hand, or *to* the left: to the end that he may prolong *his* days in his kingdom, he, and his children, in the midst of Israel.

This section of the law, this "law of the kings," had been given to Moses some 400 years before the time of Samuel. God knew what would occur and had provided for the situation. Under God's law for kings, the king and the people could continue to love and serve God unencumbered.

So what action did Samuel take to uphold God's purposes and will in the midst of a rather critical and defining moment for Israel?

I Samuel 8:21, 22:

And Samuel heard all the words of the people, and he rehearsed them in the ears of the Lord.

And the Lord said to Samuel, Hearken unto their voice, and make them a king. And Samuel said unto the men of Israel, Go ye every man unto his city.

After this, a number of events took place. First of all, God brought together Samuel and Saul, the young man whom God had chosen to be king. Then Samuel anointed Saul to be king. In I Samuel chapter 10, Samuel called the people together and presented Saul to them as their king. It is interesting to note that Samuel opened this gathering with these introductory remarks:

I Samuel 10:18, 19:

...Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, I brought up Israel out of Egypt, and delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians, and out of the hand of all kingdoms, *and* of them that oppressed you:

And ye have this day rejected your God, who himself saved you out of all your adversities and your tribulations; and ye have said unto him, *Nay*, but set a king over us...

Some time later, after Saul had led Israel to a military victory over the Ammonites, Samuel called the people together again. The Bible says in I Samuel 11:15 that the people "made Saul king before the Lord." One wonders if they felt that Samuel's previous anointing, which was by God's revelation, was not sufficient to designate Saul to be king. In the very next chapter, the Scripture explains that Samuel spoke to the people and recounted some of the history of God's deliverance of Israel. Then he addressed the motive behind their request for a king.

I Samuel 12:12:

And when ye saw that Nahash the king of the children of Ammon came against you, ye said unto me, Nay; but a king shall reign over us: when the Lord your God was your king.

Nahash was the king who led the army that Saul and the children of Israel had just defeated. But it was the fear of Nahash and his army that had motivated the elders in I Samuel 8 to ask for a king. They wanted a king to lead them into battle because they were full of fear. It would be safe to say that if idolatry had not so influenced the people of Israel, they would not have had such fear in the first place. The Old Testament records that idolatry dominated much of Israel's history. Even in the time of Samuel, the people were seduced by the false gods of the people of other nations who lived nearby.

Idolatry builds spiritual weakness due to dependence on false gods. A mind filled with idolatrous thoughts is not a mind with the peace of God or a mind that believes His Word. Fear, which is Satan's greatest weapon, defeats God's promises for His people. Fear can cause people to be deceived. Idolatry breeds and incubates fear.

Proverbs 29:25:

The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe.

The children of Israel, because of their fear, had become ensnared. Because of fear, they bartered their freedom for the security they felt a king would offer them. But all they got, in reality, was more bondage in the form of serving a king, rather than God. They had a degree of freedom, but they could have lived in greater freedom without a king.

Fear can grip an individual; it can captivate and bind him. It can also affect a group of people, even an entire city or nation. The Book of Jeremiah contains an incredible record about Damascus, a great city of antiquity.

Jeremiah 49:24:

Damascus is waxed feeble, *and* turneth herself to flee, and fear hath seized on *her*: anguish and sorrows have taken her, as a woman in travail.

This entire city was "seized" by fear. Things like this still happen today, even in the United States of America. The media, for instance, keeps up a steady "drumbeat" about economic hardships, recessions, wars, disease, violent acts, etc., with the added dimension of trying to make anyone who is not in some hardship feel badly. All of these evil reports breed fear and are designed by Satan, the god of this world, to burden the minds of Christian believers and unbelievers alike in order to encourage negative thinking.

The children of Israel had been captivated by fear, as well. Perhaps they had heard of military victories of invading armies, such as the one commanded by Nahash. But because they had gotten away from trusting God, fear began to eat away at their minds. "Such-and-such a nation has been invaded. We must be next!"

Instead of trusting God, the people sought a worldly solution that they thought was the answer. This is important to understand. God cannot force people to believe His Word or to live in freedom. When people limit God by their thinking, God's hands are tied. He can work within someone else who is believing, but he cannot override the freedom of will of the individual who chooses not to believe. It appears that the only thing the people of Israel were willing to believe for at this point was safety and victory through a king. Freedom requires a responsibility to believe, to make the correct choices and to take the necessary actions to stay free. If people are full of fear, they are already enslaved and will never experience political freedom unless they happen to benefit from someone else's believing.

Samuel had more to say to the children of Israel.

I Samuel 12:13-15:

Now therefore behold the king whom ye have chosen, *and* whom ye have desired! and, behold, the Lord hath set a king over you.

If ye will fear [respect] the Lord, and serve him, and obey his voice, and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then shall both ye and also the king that reigneth over you continue following the Lord your God:

But if ye will not obey the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then shall the hand of the Lord be against you, as *it was* against your fathers.

In verse 19, the people finally saw the folly of their ways.

Verse 19:

And all the people said unto Samuel, Pray for thy servants unto the Lord thy God, that we die not: for we have added unto all our sins *this* evil, to ask us a king.

The people finally admitted that it was "evil" to ask for a king when God was supposed to be their ruler. One would think at this point that Samuel would try to persuade the people to forsake the idea of a king and go back to the system of judges. But this was not God's guidance. They had already gone down the road to build a kingdom. Saul's victory over the Ammonites indicated that the people could accomplish certain things under a king.

Samuel gave the children of Israel further guidance.

Verse 20:

And Samuel said unto the people, Fear not: ye have done all this wickedness: yet turn not aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart;

God was interested in the attitude of the people's hearts. Following the one true God with all their heart was the responsibility of every Israelite. This was what God desired. It did not matter as much to God whether there was a king or not. What mattered to Him was the allegiance of the people's hearts.

Verses 21-23:

And turn ye not aside: for *then should ye go after vain things*, which cannot profit nor deliver; for they are vain.

For the Lord will not forsake his people for his great name's sake: because it hath pleased the Lord to make you his people.

Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you: but I will teach you the good and the right way:

Samuel, the man of God, would continue to teach the people the "good and the right way." And it was clear from the Word that God intended for the king to learn the Scriptures and live according to them. God had provided a plan for success for the man who would lead Israel as king. As long as the people followed God, He could bless them even under the reign of a king. Of course, if the king was a godly man, it would make living under his rule while serving God that much easier.

Verse 24:

Only fear [respect, reverence] the Lord, and serve him in truth with all your heart: for consider how great *things* he hath done for you.

For the second time Samuel told the people to serve God with their whole heart. This was God's requirement for His people² with a king or without a king. The only thing that would hold the kingdom together would be the people believing and acting on this truth. Without it, they would become slaves to another nation because they would not believe to stay free. Samuel mentioned the consequences of unbelief as a final warning.

Verse 25:

But if ye shall still do wickedly, ye shall be consumed, both ye and your king.

God's desire for His people has always been that they love Him with all their heart and then walk in freedom. When men fail to keep God first, they bring slavery upon themselves – first spiritually, then in other categories. God's primary will was *not* for Israel to have a king, but God could not interfere with the

people's freedom of will. Even when they realized that they had sinned, the people of Israel were not willing to believe they would be safe and prosper without the protection of a king. God initially provided a king whom He had chosen. This king, Saul, walked with God for a time, but then he began to abuse his authority. The reigns of subsequent kings in Israel and Judah fulfilled the prophecies of Samuel concerning the oppressive nature of a king and his control over the wealth of the people. Only a handful of the kings who followed Saul walked with God to any great degree.

The way to keep our nation free is first and foremost to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. When we love God, then we will keep his commandments, which are not grievous. (1 John 5:2, 3) His commandments for our day include the admonition to operate His power in our lives and share His Word with others. These privileges and responsibilities are of vital importance in building and maintaining the true foundation for freedom in any nation. God's Word is the strength of a nation.

It does matter to God what kind of government we live under. An oppressive government blesses no one and may interfere with God's people carrying out His Word. But, as we have seen from the record in 1 Samuel 8, government is of secondary significance when compared to the heart of the individual. The Word of God living in the hearts of individuals can make the difference in a city, state, or nation when those believers take positive action according to God's Word. Government cannot bring God's deliverance to individuals through budgets and programs. But God will bring true deliverance to nations when believers know and understand His Word, and then walk by believing and live the truths of His Word.

1. Most of the governmental authority exercised in Israel at this time was of a local nature. Elders administered tribal government in cities and towns.
2. Note that in Old Testament times, God's people were servants of God, first and foremost. Today, born-again believers are sons of God first, and secondly, servants to their fellow men.

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