

Lesson 4 – 1 Samuel 7:2-8:22

Many years ago, 1982 in fact, John Naisbitt authored a book titled *Megatrends* that forcefully reminded us of the dramatic changes taking place within our society. The old concerns of the 1960s and 1970s of racism and sexism, while still present, were seen to be giving away to the concerns of coping with the effects of a radical shift from a reliance on industry to a reliance on information. And, as we have found with the explosion of information technology since, change can be both threatening and challenging – whether we’re still in the work place keeping pace with ever-changing technology or program updates constantly, or realizing that our kids know more about computers and phones than we’ll ever know.

This week’s lesson has a lot to do with change . . . and a lot to do with consistency. I’d like to point out eight such contrasts in these two chapters of 1 Samuel.

Samuel was barely 20 years old when Shiloh was destroyed. He returned to his home town in Ramah, married, had children and moved into the role of judge and prophet, only occasionally officiating as a priest in Ramah, Bethel, Mizpah and Gilgal. Imagine the disappointment for a young man – basically a “career” change almost before he got started . . . from tabernacle priest to circuit judge.

One of the things that helps us mature faster is disappointment; whether it is in public or private, our jobs or our relationships, the key is how we handle it. We can become bitter or better. We can choose an attitude of regret or recommitment. Samuel, to his credit, without bitterness or regret, set himself to the task of rebuilding Israel’s ruined state. With no promise of eventual success, he faithfully ministered to the people through a dreary period of their history.

So here is the first contrast: While Samuel faced a career change at an early age, he was consistent by staying with his calling and his commitment to serve the Lord.

Speaking particularly of the 20 years referred to in 1 Samuel 7:2,

Dr. A. F. Kirkpatrick wrote: *“The period here passed over in silence was a dark page in Israel’s history, politically and religiously. They were in abject submission to the Philistines and the people sank into idolatry again. But meanwhile Samuel was growing in strength and influence, and when the right moment came, and the desire for better things sprang up as the fruit of his prophetic labors, he was ready to take his place of the leader of the nation.”*

We’ve been reminding you that Eli and Samuel ministered in the era of the judges. We know from the Book of Judges that there were seven recorded cycles of misery for God’s people. The cycle went like this: they would disobey God; He would send enemies to chastise them; eventually they repented and cried out to God; and He sent a deliverer (a judge) to put them on the right track again. Samson was the last judge/deliverer recorded in the Book of Judges and he was a contemporary with Samuel. As Samuel served the needs of those in the highlands, Samson served as a judge on Judah’s southern border. The times were dangerous and there can be no doubt that Samson’s presence and reputation for physical strength gave Samuel a measure of protection as he moved about and ministered in different parts of the country.

It was probably the news of Samson’s death at Gaza, and the destruction of the Philistine temple, that shocked the nation into wakefulness and prompted the people to seek Samuel for a renewed commitment to the Lord. God had been disciplining them by allowing other nations to oppress them. They had difficulty maintaining food and shelter because of the constant enemy raids. Times were hard. A society doesn’t sustain itself for long without the people enjoying a sense of security and stability. They had forfeited that by turning away from God to worship false idols. They lagged behind other nations who were more advanced in commerce and industry. Their knowledge of God and His will for them was only a topic around the fire when adversity struck.

That’s a question to ask ourselves. Is that the only time we seek God’s face and His will – when adversity enters our lives? When times are easy, it’s human nature to think

we're in control. But when adversity strikes, we want God to fight our battles.

So Samuel told the people to 1) get rid of the foreign gods and 2) commit themselves to serve the Lord only – with the promise “He will deliver you.”

That's the second contrast: The nation wanted a change from oppression by returning to God, but Samuel was consistent with God's requirement that it only came from repentance and recommitment.

The problem for most is that we want deliverance without having to change anything in our lives, isn't it? We want help – no repentance, no change of lifestyle . . . the easy way. But repentance is necessary! 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” So we confess our sins and we study God's Word, not only to confirm Biblical beliefs, but to grow spiritually and develop those Biblical values that change our lives. The whole idea of repentance is turning from sin and turning towards God.

Putting away those false gods, however, may have been harder than it seemed. Idol worship was very attractive to the carnal flesh. It was characterized by an atmosphere of revelry, entertainment and festivals – everything that appealed to the flesh. The Law of Moses by contrast was somber and self-denying.

That's what the world thinks today – Christianity is dull and legalistic (no drinking, movies, dancing, cards – lots of “don'ts” –). But we know differently, don't we. It is not ritual religion, but a joyful personal relationship with Jesus Christ. That joy should reflect in our smiling faces; our generous attitudes; our moral lifestyles. After all, we have the assurance of eternal life, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, God's promises, the abundant life of freedom from anxiety – God's peace knowing He IS fighting our battles!

So Samuel gave the challenge and the people were jolted out of their complacency and readily responded. Mizpah is a mountain about five miles northwest of Jerusalem in territory that belonged to the tribe of Benjamin. By ones and twos, in families and in small groups, and from all points of the compass, the people began to converge on Mizpah. For

Samuel it must have been a tense yet exciting scene as the nation began to assemble. Were winds of change beginning to blow across the land? Would he see the fruit of his persistent labor and witness a true return to the Lord in heart and mind?

Verse 6 says they drew water and poured it out before the Lord and fasted and prayed. There was no Biblical precedent for this act, but the commentators seem to feel that it symbolized that, “just as water once poured on the ground cannot be gathered up again,” the people were indicating their decision to follow God and do His will was irrevocable. No thought of turning back.

Can you visualize doing that as an act of worship before God – pouring the water and committing your heart to serve the one true living God? We do that when we take communion. It’s meant to be not only a reminder of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross for our sins, but a time of fresh consecration of commitment to serve the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We empty ourselves of “self” so the Holy Spirit can refill us and fill us again each day as we pour out our lives into the service of others.

I read an apt illustration of consecration: A Christian asked the pastor, “Will you please tell me in a word what your idea of consecration is?” He held out a blank sheet of paper and replied, “It’s to sign your name at the bottom of this blank sheet, and to let God fill it in as He will.”

Here’s the third contrast: The nation changed its course as they thrust Samuel into a prominent leadership role at Mizpah; however, Samuel was consistent in knowing that all victory comes from God and it comes through intercessory prayer.

Recognizing our needs and Who can meet them is the order of priority for us as it was for Samuel.

Scripture tells us that Samuel was a man of prayer. He interceded with God on behalf of the people. Dick Eastman’s book Love on Its Knees tells about six functions of intercessory prayer:

1. Intercession is serving – making oneself available to serve others in prayer.

2. Intercession is fighting – engaging in spiritual warfare with Satan on behalf of another.
3. Intercession is identifying with others – a sensitivity to another’s needs. (Sometimes we feel too weak to pray for ourselves.)
4. Intercession is sharing – being generous with our time and spiritual gifts.
5. Intercession is weeping – Charles Spurgeon said, “tears are liquid prayer.” God keeps our tears in a bottle (Psalm 56:8) indicating He treasures the tenderhearted.
6. Intercession is dying – death to self-interests on behalf of promoting the interests of another.

Intercessory prayer is a real privilege for each one of us and we hope you know that it’s a vital part of what accompanies this Bible study.

Well, as the questions pointed out, Israel was hardly off her knees when the enemy attacked. Seeing such a large gathering at Mizpah, the Philistines assumed they were preparing for war. So rather than wait for Israel to get organized, the Philistines took the offensive and “struck while the iron was hot” so to speak.

Verses 10-11 say, “But that day the Lord thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites. The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way...”

It was interesting to note how many commentators thought the thunder was just a natural phenomenon that God used. Like there were storm clouds overhead anyway and it wasn’t that special. That may be, but I think about my own reaction to thunder. (How many of you admitted a fear of thunder?) If it’s far away – it’s easy to explain it in the physical realm and there’s not too much fear with it. But let a big clap of thunder sound overhead, and my heart races! It scares me stiff and it sure sounds like the wrath of God. Nothing like it to instill fear and reverence for God RIGHT NOW! Have any of you been

on a plane flying through stormy weather? The turbulence bounces the plane around, and you grab to hold on to something or someone. Fear is real and a lot of prayers are being said at a time like that. A close kin to thunder is a jolting earthquake. God gets your attention!

Israel could be quick to forget God's power, but the Philistines needed very little to remind them (remember their experience with the ark and their idol God, Dagon?) – and a clap of powerful heart-stopping thunder could do it!

Verse 13 says, “So the Philistines were subdued and did not invade Israelite territory again.” Israel went on to regain territory they'd lost in the past and deliver their neighbors from the Philistines as well as find peace with the Ammorites. The peace that followed the victory gave Israel opportunity to recover economically / morally / socially from two decades of hardship and deprivation.

So, another contrast: A change from Philistine oppression to the consistency of having God help fight the battles that brought peace.

Because it's so easy to forget those special occasions where God has interceded on our behalf, Samuel set up a stone called EBENEZER (stone of help).

I was watching an old movie “Dear God” a few weeks ago. You remember the one with John Denver and George Burns? And it ends up with George Burns (as God) in a courtroom to prove He exists. They want to see a miracle, so He disappears before their eyes. They can't believe it – even though they “saw” it. No faith.

One of the greatest gifts God gives us is the recall of His faithfulness, both in our memory of first-hand experiences, and in the record from His Word. One of the great revelations of the Old Testament, and why we study the whole Bible, is seeing God's faithfulness over and over again to Israel. But personally, can't you recall in your own life times God was faithful to you? I know God has seen me through financial hard times, job loss, stress with family and health and so much more. Just remembering makes you want to sing, “Great is Thy Faithfulness” – morning by morning new mercies I see.

Circumstances in life may change, but God is consistent in His faithfulness.

Well, peace prevailed over Israel for 25 years and a new generation had grown up. To them deliverances by God from their enemies were just stories their parents told (like the ones we may have heard from our folks or grandparents or great-grandparents about the Great Depression). Being reared in comparative peace and safety, it's easy to take for granted the source of our many blessings. For some, it doesn't become real until it involves "me."

Samuel was now about 65. Samson was gone and Samuel had appointed his two sons, Joel and Abijah, as judges for the southern region. Often a parallel is drawn between Eli and Samuel and their parenting skills. There are three styles of parenting:

- 1) authoritarian – where discipline is harsh/rigid and children are allowed little freedom;
- 2) authoritative – where love and responsibility are balanced; and
- 3) permissive – where children are indulged and discipline is lax.

Other than we know that Samuel was away from home on his circuit journeys, there is no need to think they did not receive good training at home. And, I'd like to assume there was a godly Mrs. Samuel holding the line when he was away, plus perhaps there was Grandpa Elkanah and Grandma Hannah. We need to remember that children, once out from under the strong leadership of the home, can have their own weaknesses revealed. Some need time to grow and mature and learn for themselves the lessons we've tried to teach them. It's never good to have a parent gone. Certainly in our day there are more single parent homes but that doesn't have mean they don't get good training in righteousness.

What is consistent in people, however, is the reminder from Jeremiah 17:9 "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" Joel and Abijah sinned.

They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.

However, 1 Chronicles 6:33 seems to indicate that possibly Joel (and maybe Abijah) had repented of their sins, for Joel's son is mentioned as one of the musicians David put in charge of officiating before the Tent of Meeting prior to the Temple being built.

That's our fifth contrast: The change of leadership from aging Samuel to his sons, but the consistency of temptation that can lead any man to sin.

Sometime during the year 1044 B.C. the elders of Israel gathered to discuss matters of national importance. They agreed on an agenda and then made their way to Ramah to the home of Samuel. Standing before Samuel, the elders made known their desire for a change of administration. Their words contained a mixture of:

- 1) unjust criticism, "You're too old (implying he was incompetent)";
- 2) your sons do not follow in your way; and
- 3) a consensus of opinion "So now appoint a king to lead us such as all the other nations have."

Their request (which was in reality a demand) permitted no discussion on the issue.

It's always what we can see before our eyes that is more appealing than what we have to take on faith. They had already made up their minds.

What did Samuel do? He prayed (vs.6). There's no doubt he felt the sting of criticism and rejection. How do you respond to rejection? Pout? Gripe? Or "tell the Lord on 'em?" He didn't argue with them and then prayed afterwards. He excused himself and went to the Lord in prayer. Don't we all wish we had that power of self-control? By laying the problem out before the Lord, he was able to . . .

- 1) **let go** of his problem
- 2) **lean on** his relationship with the Lord and
- 3) **listen to** God's counsel to receive a new perspective on the situation.

All of this placed him in touch with the Person who was far more emotionally significant to himself than the elders of Israel. A great lesson for us, isn't it? By discussing it with the Lord, we're able to tell the Lord how we feel and why. It keeps us

from harboring resentment and blaming others. We get God's perspective and direction.

So, that's easy to see the sixth contrast: Israel wanted a change of government, and Samuel was consistent in praying and listening for God's direction.

God said in verse 7, "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." Give them a king but warn them how they will be treated, what it will really cost to have not a King that gives, but a king that takes and takes again.

We wonder . . . if the enthronement of a king was so detrimental to the people, why did God allow it? We know that Abraham was told that his line of descendants would include kings, and that kingship of Israel would foreshadow the millennial reign of the Lord Jesus Christ. The kings, however, were expected to be responsible to God – just as all that Christ does (and will do) is in accordance with the divine will of the Father. But Israel couldn't wait for God's timing. They wanted it now. Sometimes God's response to a hard heart is a positive answer to prayer, and we live with the consequences.

Contrast number seven – Change from a theocracy to a monarchy would be costly, but it's consistent that human nature wants its own way. Samuel faithfully passed on God's warnings about what this action would cost them personally and financially – the king would take the best of everything. But the people had made up their minds. Give us a king!

All Samuel could do was confess their obstinacy again before the Lord in prayer (vs.21). Again, we need to remember Samuel's prayers didn't change his circumstances. So often we expect God to suddenly and miraculously bring a reverse of anything that's unpleasant to us. But the key is that Samuel's handling of this emotional rejection was his submission to the will of God (and remember he had a good example in Eli). His role was reduced, but he remained loyal to his responsibilities.

In facing rejection, our primary temptation is to accept another person's judgment of us. The passive individual will become apathetic – feeling he has no worth. The

aggressive individual responds with open resentment. The moderate temperament usually conceals a gnawing bitterness that ultimately shows itself in derogatory remarks. So, feeling rejected? Are life's problems overwhelming? We need to seek Samuel's solution . . . take the whole matter to the Lord in prayer. Samuel found out how he stood in God's eyes; I hope you've found out that in God's eye you are a child of the King. This restored his self-confidence and preserved his perspective. He would go on to serve the Lord and the people for another 25 years.

Contrast number eight – God granted the change (you can have what you want); however, God is consistent and still in charge (He will decide who it will be.)

They wanted a king . . . a king they would have. So Samuel sent them home. The choice was not going to be theirs – God would lead in the selection in His timing.

It's been an interesting lesson when we focus on the subject of change and consistency. Some things never change – any of you remember the taste of a postage stamp? (Thankfully there are self-stick stamps now.) However, we know that each of us has experienced change in our lives even in this last year. For some it's been in your career, losing a loved one, health issues, financial crisis, children, or even spiritual warfare. We transverse the ups and downs, the peaks and valleys of life because our eyes are focused on a constant goal – the Lord Jesus Christ – to be like Him and one day to be with Him. The Lord is just as consistent and sovereign today in our lives as He was for the nation of Israel. He hears and answers prayer, fights our battles, and is the King who not only gives, but has given His Son, that we may be called children of the king.

I challenge you to think this week about these things – how the world perceives Christianity through you. Is it a joy to serve the living God and does it show on your face?

- How about pouring out your life before the Lord as a drink offering of commitment? Is your commitment as irretrievable as water that has soaked into the ground?
- Will you remember the power and sovereignty of God as we think about thunder and earthquakes or tornados? He is an awesome God!

- Most of all, please recognize that what really matters is God’s opinion of us, not that of other people. He is our shelter . . . our comforter . . . our support . . . our loving Father. And all God’s people said, “Amen.”

Let’s pray: Most gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you for this reminder again of Your sovereignty in our lives. You are in the process of changing us into the likeness of our Lord Jesus. May we be consistent by not rejecting your goodness with intentional sin or presuming upon your infinite grace. Bless us now as we depart having been blessed by being in your Word. Amen.