

Samuel the Judge

1 Samuel 7:2-17

What makes a good leader? It's one of those questions that people tend to debate. The qualities I may admire in a leader may not be the same qualities you admire in a leader. Sometimes the qualities differ from one culture to another. Listen to the qualities listed by a young man from Papua New Guinea when he answered this question.

- He must know the traditional laws and customs of the community.
- He must know the land boundaries and origin of his clan or tribe.
- He must be a great warrior or fighter and have stood firm and led his tribe into tribal fight.
- He must have magic charms.
- He must be man of wisdom and knowledge, vision and planning.
- He must have many wives, many gardens and many pigs.
- He must be an honest person, show respect and be kind to his group members and fair in his decision making and judgement.
- He must be a person of hospitality and not be too selfish and greedy.
- He must be the person who stands with his people in both good and bad times.

And so it goes on. I have a suspicion there may be a couple of things on that list that wouldn't make it on your lists.

What sort of leader did Israel need? The old leadership is gone. Eli's dead. His two sons are dead. They had their good points and their bad points. Many of their bad

points were highlighted for us back in chapter 2. Eli's sons were corrupt. Their morality differed significantly from God's requirements. And they abused their position – using their power to their own advantage. The nation suffered under their leadership. It probably wouldn't be a good idea to get leaders like them.

But who'll fill the vacuum? Samuel seems to be waiting in the wings – he seems to have been prepared by God. Will he be the next leader? Does he have the right qualities? What style of leader will he be?

- Will he be another judge like Gideon and Samson?
- Will he be a prophet – the one like Moses who was promised by God?
- Will he be a king – there seem to have been hints about that possibility in the text?

They're some of the questions hanging in the air as we come to 1 Samuel 7. They'll still be hanging in the air when we get to chapter 8. Yet, as we go through this story, we're given some strong indications of some things that are fairly crucial for a leader of God's people.

The Passing of Time

The narrator opens the next part of the story with a time reference. Verse 2:

It was a long time, twenty years in all, that the ark remained at Kiriath Jearim, and all the people of Israel mourned and sought after the Lord.

I want to pause to think about the time factor. I suspect when we read through Samuel, we read it with minds influenced by modern books.

- Our modern novels are usually quite detailed. Often, time doesn't pass quickly. A couple of years ago I read a Ken Follett novel – nine days took

600+ pages to cover. Only the brief final chapter – the one that reported the "happily ever after ending" – was set outside that nine-day time frame.

- Our modern historical biographies are also quite detailed. It's hard to imagine a biographer leaving a 20-year gap in their examination of the subject's life. We'd feel such a gap was a cover-up – that the writer was leaving out something important that didn't fit with their theory of what made this person tick.

I think it's easy for us to read the Bible with that mindset and to skim over these time references without noticing them. We read chapter 6 and learn God did such-and-such. We turn over the page to chapter 7, wanting to see what God did next. We think of a short time frame. We're expecting something to happen a couple of weeks later. We miss the reference to 20 years – or we see it and it doesn't sink in. God sent them back the ark. They rejoice in God's goodness. They repent. They get delivered from the Philistines. Bang, bang, bang, bang. But it's not like that. We've got 20 years between chapter 6 and chapter 7 – 20 years for Samuel to have grown older.

Did Israel mourn and seek after God for that entire 20 years? That's certainly one possibility. Israel was in slavery in Egypt before Moses was born – yet Moses was 80 by the time God sent him to stand before Pharaoh and demand the release of His people. God's timing doesn't always correspond to our expectations. However, on this occasion, I think it's more likely the mourning and seeking after God came at the end of the 20 years – for how can it be said they sought God for 20 years if they still had their foreign gods at the end of that time?

What brought this about? We're not told directly, but there's a fairly strong hint in verse 3 that it has to do with the Philistines. Their encounter with God's ark may have slowed them down a little bit – made them a little tentative in how they treated Israel – but after time's passed and no further drastic thing's happened, they may have started to flex their military muscles once again.

There's a second hint in the way the narrator tells the story. The story's just like an episode from Judges. Do you remember the cycle of Judges? It goes like this.

- Israel sins and goes after foreign gods.
- God sends a foreign nation against Israel to oppress her.
- After a few years of such oppression, Israel cries out to God for help – early on, there are indications that they also repent of their idolatry; as the book progresses, less is said about that.
- God hears the cry and sends a deliverer – a judge.
- Through the judge, God rescues Israel.
- Israel has peace for a number of years.

Then the cycle begins all over again. This passage seems to follow that same pattern. It doesn't expressly say that the Philistines oppressed Israel – but there's a fairly strong implication.

The Call for Allegiance to God

Notice what Samuel says to them in verse 3:

If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve Him only, and He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.

The test of their repentance is not how well they mourn. We don't know exactly how these people were expressing their mourning.

- They may have cried floods of tears.
- They may have worn sackcloth constantly.
- They may have covered their heads with mountains of ashes.

We don't know. It doesn't matter. Samuel doesn't criticise them for mourning. There's nothing wrong with them doing that. But, in itself, that's not sufficient. It's not Biblical repentance. Their actions need to be consistent with their mourning.

OK, Samuel says, you say you want to serve God. Well, do it. Why have you still got all these foreign gods hanging around the place? Why are you caught up in the Canaanite lifestyle? Don't you realise that's inconsistent with what you're saying. God says:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. ... You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, ... (Exodus 20:2-5)

So, if you're serious about serving God, you've got to pay attention to His word. It doesn't make sense to say you're serving God and still have all these foreign gods dotting the landscape. You've got to get rid of them.

Are you captured by God or by your culture? Yes, there is a certain appeal about Canaanite religion. Having sexual play as part of your religious duties certainly spices up the weekly trip to the temple. It's not surprising those Canaanite men have a petition going for daily services. But that cult of offering your glands to Baal as your

reasonable service so the crops will grow is an abomination to God.

- It's an insult to God to suggest He can't look after the fertility of Canaan and He needs a little help from Baal and you.
- It's an insult to God to ignore His design of human sexuality and to misuse His gift.

If you want to hang onto those foreign religious practices, don't pretend you want to serve God. That's all part of the meaning of the word *repent*.

God hasn't changed – He remains a jealous God. God's requirements haven't changed – He demands exclusive allegiance. It's not simply enough to mourn about the lack of God in your life or the bad things that seem to be happening to you. God requires that those who serve Him, serve Him only. He's not just an addendum on the edges of your life. He asks you to give up the gods of our culture that still have a place in your life – to get rid of those foreign gods.

What are the gods of our culture?

- There's the god of materialism – the god of having to accumulate more and more things; that life consists in the abundance of my possessions. What I have is never enough. There's always more to buy – a bigger house, a better car, classier clothes, more exotic food, yet another CD. And if I can't think of more things to buy, I simply have to pick up this god's bible – all the advertising leaflets that clog my letter-box.
- There's the god of hedonism – the god of seeking for personal pleasure; that life consists in the number of highs I can have. My last pleasurable

experience is fading in my memory. I've been caught up in the monotony of everyday life for too long. I deserve another boost – another high – perhaps a good meal at a good restaurant, a night at the movies or a live show, something to pamper myself, maybe a holiday. Or perhaps your pleasure comes from adrenalin rushes – looking for a bigger buzz than last time: the roller coaster, skydiving, bungee jumping, base jumping. This god's bible can be looked up in the lifestyle shows on TV.

- Then there's the related god of sexual freedom – the god of giving in to my glands whenever I feel like it with whomever I feel like. It's supposed to be unhealthy to suppress those inner urges – it could lead to all sorts of neuroses.

Will you get rid of those gods – and others like them – from your life?

It's not easy. For a start, it's not easy at the thinking level. One of our problems is that many of these things don't seem like foreign gods to us. They're part of our culture – part of the very atmosphere we've grown up in. They've become a part of us. You may be asking yourself right now: Is materialism really a god? It doesn't seem to have any idols or temples. It doesn't have any priests asking for sacrifices.

Another of our problems is that many of these things are not wrong in themselves. God doesn't say that you can't have any possessions – that it's wrong to own a house or buy a car or to have a couple of CDs to play in your car. And God didn't design life so it's utterly boring for us with no hint of pleasure. He hasn't said you're not allowed to enjoy eating pumpkin.

The problem comes when our desire for these things – whether it be material things or experiences of pleasure – becomes greater than our desire for God. The problem comes when these things dominate our lives rather than God. The problem comes when these things and the pursuit of these things have captured our hearts. It's when God's left on the sidelines of our lives. It's when God's merely one of the many influences on our lives. Will you get rid of our culture's gods from your life? This is what's involved in *repentance*.

God Beats the Philistines – Again

Let's come back to the story in 1 Samuel. The Israelites do put away their foreign gods – their Baals and Ashtoreths. They show Samuel they're serious about returning to God. Samuel decides to have a solemn ceremony to signify the occasion. The nation of Israel comes together at Mizpah. We're told about some of the things that are part of this assembly.

- They pour out some water before the Lord – presumably this was some form of sacrifice, but it's not something that's in the law and it's not something that's explained here. Different people have different guesses as to exactly what it meant.
- They fast for the day – in the Bible, the most common form of fasting is to go without food.
- They confess that they've sinned against God.

Their repentance appears to be genuine.

The Philistines also decide to turn up to this assembly. Again, be careful of reading our technology into the passage. You may be thinking of Samuel sending out an email across all Israel and all the Israelites arriving in

their cars a couple of days later. Some traitorous Israelite forwards a copy of the email to the Philistines or the Philistine spy-satellite picks up the movement of so many Israeli cars and their bombers are scrambled for a low-flying raid on Mizpah. OK, maybe you don't think in quite those terms, but you still may be thinking too quickly.

An assembly such as Samuel called doesn't happen overnight. The message has to go out by foot. People have to turn up by foot. All that movement of people is sure to draw attention. It's not surprising the Philistines turn up. They probably suspect a revolt's being hatched. Not only do they turn up – they turn up in uniform with their military hardware clearly on display.

Look at what Israel says to Samuel in verse 8:

Do not stop crying out to the Lord our God for us, that He may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines.

That's a fair bit different from what they said in 4:3

Let us bring the ark of the Lord's covenant from Shiloh, so that it may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies.

Two things to note:

- First, they recognise they don't control God. They can only appeal for God's mercy.
- Secondly, they turn to the mediator appointed by God – the leader God's provided for them – and ask him to intercede for them.

And so Samuel cries out to God on Israel's behalf.

God responds to Samuel's prayer. Verse 10b:

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.

It's what Hannah celebrated in her prayer:

It is not by strength that one prevails;

those who oppose the Lord will be shattered.

He will thunder against them from heaven;

the Lord will judge the ends of the earth.

Israel had no strength. She probably didn't even have her weapons with her. She hadn't gathered for war. All the military advantage was with the Philistines – they were prepared and they were stronger. Yet, God thundered from heaven and their strength was shattered. Israel was delivered from her enemy. God's reversed the defeat of 1 Samuel 4.

Have they finally found the way to make life work? Do you remember we asked that question a couple of weeks ago? At that time, Israel thought she knew how to make life work. She had God in a box. All she had to do was bring God to the battlefield and God would perform on cue. Unfortunately for her, God didn't perform and she was soundly beaten. Does this story teach us that Israel had the underlying principle right – she just had the method wrong? The underlying principle is getting God to perform for you.

- The method she used on that occasion was to bring the ark to the battlefield. That's the wrong method.
- The method she uses this time is to repent, get rid of her idols, pour some water on the ground, fast, offer a sacrifice and have a prophet pray for them.

I think we have a tendency to read the story that way – but that'd be to miss the point. The point is that in chapter 4 they attempt to use God for their ends; in chapter 7 they pay attention to God's word and submit

themselves to that. It's related back to Deuteronomy 28. That's a fairly long chapter of 68 verses. The NIV breaks it into two main sections:

- The first 14 verses are headed blessings for obedience.
- The next 54 verses are headed curses for disobedience.

It's an interesting balance of verses. Let me summarise what it says to Israel.

- If you don't pay attention to God's word – if you don't obey His commands – then these curses will happen to you (including getting beaten in battle). That's what happens in 1 Samuel 4. Israel didn't pay attention to God's word and they were defeated in battle.
- However, if you do pay attention to God's word – if you obey God's commands – then these blessings will be given to you (including the defeat of your enemies in battle). That's what happens in chapter 7. They put away their idols. They turn back to God. God gives them victory.

So yes, they have now found a method that works – but that method is to submit wholeheartedly to God. They're now letting God call the shots.

What's it mean for us today? Is this a method we can use so we can get God to make life work for us?

- I must make sure I repent of all known sin.
- I must put away all idols.
- I must pay attention to God's word.
- I must pray a lot and get the pastor to pray for me.
- I must fast.

Then God will bless me with a peaceful, comfortable,

upper middle-class life in country Bathurst. Sounds good, doesn't it?

There are a couple of flaws in the argument. First, God doesn't promise Christians the lifestyle of the rich and comfortable. That's not what our salvation's about. The New Testament contains plenty of warnings about the dangers of riches. What's more, the New Testament says:

... *everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted* ... (2 Timothy 3:12)

That hardly seems to promise a comfortable lifestyle.

Secondly, we've imported our culture's god of materialism into our definition of how God must bless us. We haven't actually turned away from that god – just tried to Christianise it. We keep defining *the good life* in terms dictated by our culture. It's our culture that defines *the good life* in terms of money and plenty of possessions and comfortable mansions and good food and having fun. We want to import that into the way we read the Bible. We want to import it into the way we expect God to bless us. The Bible defines *the good life* in terms of goodness – that is, holiness and purity and righteousness.

The method is to submit to God – and that is its own reward. I should repent of all known sin – not because I see that as a means to a fatter bank account – but because it's the right thing to do and it's turning away from things that are extremely damaging in my life and it's part of submitting to God and it's what true goodness is all about. Repenting from sin is actually part of the salvation God offers me.

God's Leader

The story finishes with a summary statement in verse 15:

Samuel continued as judge over Israel all the days of his life. From year to year he went on a circuit from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah, judging Israel in all those places.

God's provided a leader for Israel – Samuel. What sort of leader is he? First, he's a leader who calls Israel to repent and brings them back to God. He calls them to get rid of their idols and commit themselves totally to God. He continues to judge them – which means that he worked at putting things right in Israel. That probably involved him in settling disputes and things like that, but more importantly it involved him in calling Israel to repent and rid themselves of their pagan ways.

Secondly, he's a leader who brings God's word to Israel and intercedes for Israel before God. We've seen that before in the earlier chapters – with Samuel being established as a prophet. It's here in this chapter with his application of the law to their current situation – telling them God calls them to repent. But it's not simply a one-way thing. He also spoke to God on behalf of the people. That's his purpose in calling the convention in verse 5. That's what he does in verse 9 in response to Israel's plea.

Thirdly, he's a leader through whom God delivers His people from their enemy. In this instance, Samuel himself doesn't get involved in battle – like some of the earlier judges. Yet, it's in response to Samuel's prayer that God acts to deliver Israel.

Which is more important for Israel – to have a strong man who can lead them to victory in battle or to have a

godly man who'll lead them to relate to God on God's terms? Which is more important for you and I today – to have a shrewd leader who can lead to us economic prosperity and comfortable lifestyles and world domination or to have a godly leader who'll lead us to honour God and to have godly lifestyles and to grow in righteousness?

When God provides us with the perfect leader, what's he look like? Is he the macho man who can steamroll over the top of his enemies and subdue all opposition by the strength of his own muscle? Is he the wealthy entrepreneur who always backs the profitable company and buys himself power and position through his own cleverness? Is he the charismatic personality who has everyone falling at his feet because of his great beauty and charm? Jesus comes as the leader who's perfectly godly and who serves those whom He leads. Moreover, in terms of what we've seen in Samuel:

- Jesus brings God's word to us and calls on us to submit to that word.
- Jesus intercedes for us in heaven itself.
- Jesus delivers us from our greatest enemy – namely, our own sin.