

March 28

1 Samuel 8-12

We read today that toward the end of Samuel's life, Israel began to clamor for a king. 'It was all well and good,' they might have said, 'to know that God was the real King of Israel, but every other nation that they had ever heard about had a human king and if it worked so well for everyone else, why wouldn't it work for them?' Samuel was not only not in favor of the idea, he bitterly opposed it, and on behalf of God warned the Israelites that if they took for themselves an earthly king, the one certain thing they could know about their future was that there would be taxes, taxes and more taxes -- their boys would be marched off to war -- their freedoms would be limited. It would not be good!

Israel's desire for an earthly king had some immediate consequences. It posed the prospect of having to live with leaders like Samuel's sons. After all that Samuel had observed while growing up in the household of Eli, the one mistake we would not expect him to have made was that of failing to restrain his sons if their hearts and minds were set to evil. He made the same mistakes that Eli did! And when the people of Israel began to face the prospect of life with Samuel's sons as their new leaders, they rebelled. However, what would have happened if Samuel's sons had been like their father? What if they had been good leaders, honest men, devout priests and wise leaders? If the people of God had good leaders to look to, would they then have been spared the agony of one of the worst decisions in human history? If only Samuel had done a better job training his sons to be leaders -- how much trouble Israel would have been spared. If only Eli had done a better job of training his sons to lead -- the Ark would never have been lost and Israel would not have been defeated. Perhaps both Eli and Samuel were so busy leading that they forgot to take the time to train leaders who could follow them. They were so busy ministering that they didn't stop to disciple their successors and that was a fatal mistake.

Perhaps the most important ministry you will ever have is the ministry of passing on everything you know and do to one, two or three other people, who will be able to stand on your shoulders and go higher. That blessing will be all the sweeter if the ones to whom you pass it are your own children.

Samuel was a very great leader, but he forgot to reproduce himself and much of his ministry was therefore lost when he died.

### 1 Samuel 9 and 10

Moving on. 1 Samuel 9-10. I want for us to notice today that Saul and Samuel had a divine appointment. Neither man knew the other or had any intention of contacting the other. But God wanted them to meet, so one morning the donkeys belonging to Saul's father simply wandered off. Saul was sent to track them, and that he did -- all over the portion of the country inhabited by the tribe of Benjamin - - until finally he found himself near Zuph, the place where Samuel was. Since Saul

had never even heard of Samuel, (that seems strange and we'll talk about it in a few minutes,) he wouldn't know to look for him, so God arranged in advance for a servant to be sent along with Saul, who was familiar with the prophet of God! Samuel didn't know Saul, either, but since he regularly conversed with God, God simply told him that Saul would be arriving and he was the man God had chosen to be the first King of Israel. Some would say this story was a result of circumstances and choices on the human side. However, it is very clear that this was more than that...it was a well executed plan from the divine side.

Continuing on to I Samuel 11 and 12. We see that Saul's reign as king started out very well. He made good choices -- he acted wisely -- he was a decisive leader -- He had courage -- he gave God glory for victory -- he was magnanimous to his enemies. He started very well.

Let me see if I can give you some examples of each of those traits: He made good choices. After Saul had been anointed king, it would have been pretty natural to assume that a fairly drastic change in lifestyle was both appropriate and necessary. You've made me king? Great, now where will we build my palace and who is going to be my cupbearer and who will plant my fields? I'm going to need some servants, you understand. Saul, initially at least, chose to forgo all of that, and went back to his farm. When the appeal for help comes from Jabesh Gilead, one of the towns on the east side of the Jordan River, Saul was out in his own fields plowing behind his own yoke of oxen. Though it is clear enough from the text that not everyone in Israel was thrilled with Samuel's choice (it was really God's choice) for king, it is equally evident that most people did accept Saul as king, and that he could have asked for and received at least a few kingly privileges. It does not appear that initially he asked for any such things. That was a very wise choice, especially in light of all that Samuel had said about the pitfalls of having a king. Saul was at this stage of his career also a decisive leader. When news came from Jabesh Gilead about the cruel demand of the Ammonite oppressors, Saul's response was immediate. His call to arms was accompanied by a powerful incentive -- a threat to destroy the oxen of any who would not go along -- and Saul got an immediate response. He raised an army in a flash. He had courage. He led the troops himself. He led from the front. That is always a great characteristic for a leader. People respond well to leaders who lead from the front of the pack. When the battle was ended, he made no mistake about giving the glory for the victory to God. It was the Lord who won the victory.

In that observation there is a great warning for us, because, as we will see soon enough, Saul didn't finish well. It is important to make a good beginning in any task that God assigns to you. It is important to make a good beginning in your walk with Him as a Christian, but the really critical thing is not how you begin but how you end, and you might make the best beginning in the world, but if you don't end well, it hasn't been a good run.

Invest in others and finish as well as you started. These are the lessons of Saul.