

Explore the Bible: Feared

June 15, 2016

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for July 3 focuses on 1 Samuel 12.*

The Judge's Retirement (1 Samuel 12:1-5)

One of the fascinating things about Scriptures' record of the Israelite kings—and indeed, the Israelite people as a whole—is the text's studied ambivalence toward people and institutions. There is no major character in Scripture who is lionized and displayed as faultless. The first king of Israel and the institution of the Israelite monarchy, however, both stand out for the blatant way they receive half-hearted endorsement—if that—from the narrator, from Samuel and from Yahweh himself.

Following Jewish scholar Robert Alter's general rule for finding the first actions and first words of biblical people to be a kind of shorthand description of the content of their character, we see Saul's first action in 1 Samuel 9 is searching for his father's lost donkeys. His first words are concern that his father will begin to worry about him and his servant since it is taking so long to find the beasts (1 Samuel 9:5), and then he takes his servant's suggestion to look for help from the local seer. The picture here is decidedly mundane and ambivalent. Saul is, in this snapshot, at once attempting to be devoted to his duty and unsure what steps to take next.

The pattern continues through his selection as king. After his anointing by Samuel, he is reluctant to report the incident and famously hides among the baggage at his own coronation (1 Samuel 10:20-22). As with his spontaneous ecstatic prophesying (1 Samuel 10:10), Saul seems from the outset to be caught up in something beyond his control. (Someone else eventually found those donkeys, by the way.)

Even his coronation at Mizpah does not settle the question at first. Some

“troublemakers” rejected his kingship. He is reaffirmed as king after leading the united tribes of Israel in battle against the latest threat, but part of his strategy to unite the tribes was to threaten them (1 Samuel 11:6-7). Only after this military victory did Saul’s kingship seem at all settled at another gathering of all the tribes at Gilgal.

The *identity* of the king is settled at least, but 1 Samuel 12 is about Israel’s and its kings’ *relationship* to Yahweh. After sacrifices, feasting and celebration, Samuel delivers a sobering message. First, he has the people affirm he never let them down. The judge asks Israel to judge him, and they judge him to have been righteous. Although Samuel mentions his sons, he knows they could not receive the same vindication. But Samuel himself has not failed them. Samuel calls Yahweh and Saul (“the Lord’s anointed” 1 Samuel 12:5) as witnesses to the people’s judgment. Samuel is laying the groundwork for his own and Yahweh’s judgment on the people’s decision to ask for a king.

Yahweh’s Greatest Hits (1 Samuel 12:6-11)

At the inauguration of a new era in Israel’s history, Samuel reviews Yahweh’s history with his people. Samuel explicitly says he is going to present the “evidence” of the righteous acts of Yahweh (1 Samuel 12:7). The judge asks Israel to judge Yahweh!

The case for Yahweh as leader of Israel is, not surprisingly, unimpeachable. Yahweh has not failed his people, even when they failed him. Through the exodus, through the wilderness, into the Promised Land and through the strength of the great judges (like Gideon, aka Jerub-Baal, Barak, Jephthah and ... Samuel? It takes quite a bit of confidence to put yourself in a list of “greatest judges of Israel”) Yahweh has led them, fought for them, and been faithful to them. They cried out and repented and Yahweh delivered—every time.

The King and the Storm (1 Samuel 12:12-19)

The pattern of repentance and deliverance was broken, Samuel says, by the people's demand for a king. The reason given here is slightly different than in 1 Samuel 8, which centers on Samuel's age and his sons' unfaithfulness, as well as their desire for military leadership. Here, the reason given is the most recent neighboring threat, the brutal Nahash the Ammonite (1 Samuel 11:1-2). The king they wanted is here, says Samuel (one can imagine Samuel gesturing to Saul), victorious in battle and celebrated. But the words "even though" hang ominously over the beginning of this new era, and sum up this entire speech. Here he is, exactly what you wanted, "even though the LORD your God was your king (1 Samuel 12:12)." Here stands your king that you asked for, even though Yahweh has always delivered you.

Then, Samuel reissues the challenge given first by Moses and later by Joshua to the gathered people of Israel. Fear the Lord, serve him, obey him, follow him—you and your king! The same choice to serve Yahweh or not is before them, even in a new era of monarchy. To underscore the consequences of choosing poorly, Samuel asks and Yahweh sends a thunderstorm in an unseasonable time. The text does not specify whether any of the wheat harvest was destroyed by the thunderstorm or not. If so, the loss was a tangible foretaste of what it meant for "Yahweh's hand to be against them" (1 Samuel 12:15). If not, it was not difficult for the people to grasp the message, as they respond in awe of Yahweh and Samuel. They acknowledge for the first time, as they request for Samuel to intercede on their behalf, their request for a king was evil in Yahweh's sight.

Instructions for a New Era (1 Samuel 12:20-25)

Samuel ends with another declaration of Israel's covenant responsibility and confirmation of Yahweh's covenant faithfulness. They must fear Yahweh, serve him wholeheartedly, reject futile and useless idols, and

commit themselves to remember what he has done in the past. For his part, Samuel declares his intention to keep praying for them and teaching them to do right. The threat for not heeding his call is addressed to Israel—and to its king (1 Samuel 12:25).

It is clear from the conclusion of Samuel's speech that although he has retired from the position of judge, he certainly has no intention of retiring as prophet and priest. It is his words Israel must heed if they are to stay in right relationship with Yahweh. It is through him that Yahweh's control of over creation has been enacted before their eyes. It is through him that Yahweh's faithfulness to Israel even in the midst of their unfaithfulness is confirmed. And it is his continuing responsibility, he says, to pray for them even in the midst of their unfaithfulness.

The people have chosen a new form of government, including military leadership, but Yahweh's preeminence has been dramatically confirmed. So, too, has the position of prophet. Samuel will remain a key figure in Saul's reign, the mouthpiece of God calling the king himself to account for his own obedience or disobedience.

Walter Brueggemann writes: "The rhetoric of these lines is shrewd and devastating. The king is deliberately subsumed under the conventional structure of blessing and curse. Indeed the king has no individual role to play but is simply one more member of the covenant community, subject to the same summons, available for the same blessings and curses The rhetoric in fact denies kingship any theological significance The king can matter in the life of Israel only by being obedient. The king has no other or special role."

Saul is not mentioned by name, nor does he speak in this chapter. He stands in a poetic way at an awkward point in Israel's history, and likely literally stood awkwardly and silently to one side as Samuel delivered his scathing speech. Saul's reign literally begins under a cloud.

A pattern will emerge in Saul's reign of acting when he should wait, waiting when he should act, being proud when he should be humble, and being humble when he should be confident. What if Saul had taken this moment to publicly declare before the people his intention to be obedient to Yahweh, and to lead his people in following the charge given by Samuel? Saul has addressed Israel twice—once to threaten them to join him in battle (1 Samuel 11:6-7) and once to offer mercy to his doubters and credit to Yahweh for his victory in battle (1 Samuel 11:12-13). The potential is there for setting the stage for what his kingship will be, but he has given no inaugural speech as such as Israel's first king, even though he has been crowned and now reaffirmed.

Scripture's largely ambivalent attitude toward "important" individuals and institutions is a reflection that the most important thing for individuals, leaders, groups and nations is their relationship to God. God is preeminent in importance. His kingdom is the preeminent institution. Israel's worth comes from God's commitment to them. The worth of their leaders and institutions is measured in their personal obedience and their ability to lead God's people to serve him faithfully with their whole hearts. The only king of Israel never to falter in this regard was God's own Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords.