

1 SAMUEL—WEEK 5

THE GREAT WRONG TURN



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is David and Goliath by Titian (1487–1576)
On display in the church of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice, Italy

A 20-year lamentation sets a generation up for Samuel’s call to repentance. They repent, and the LORD brings peace. But Samuel’s sons do not follow in his footsteps, and the elders of Israel respond with a perfectly stupid idea. They ask Samuel to “make us a king.”

The LORD tells Samuel to give them the king they ask for. Ouch.

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! Samuel, Week 5 — The Great Wrong Turn

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1 1 Samuel 6:20–7:4

And the men of Beth Shemesh said, “Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God? And to whom shall it go up from us?” So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kirjath Jearim, saying, “The Philistines have brought back the ark of the LORD; come down and take it up with you.”

Then the men of Kirjath Jearim came and took the ark of the LORD, and brought it into the house of Abinadab on the hill, and consecrated Eleazar his son to keep the ark of the LORD.

So it was that the ark remained in Kirjath Jearim a long time; it was there twenty years. And all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD.

Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, “If you return to the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from among you, and prepare your hearts for the LORD, and serve Him only; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines.” So the children of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only.

The historical books of the Old Testament, like all historical accounts, don’t compress time uniformly. Many pages can cover the events of a single afternoon. Yet the next passage can be a brief account like, “*So it was that the ark remained in Kirjath Jearim a long time; it was there twenty years. And all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD.*”

When you hit a brief description of a long span of time, pause to consider its magnitude. Here, a whole generation has grown up under lamentation after the LORD. That mindset has practically soaked into their DNA. In a sense, the fields are white for harvest.

The other thing that makes the fields white for harvest is Samuel’s reputation. When Samuel speaks, people listen. So, the stage is set perfectly for him to call *all the house of Israel* to repentance.

And thus the call doesn’t land on deaf ears.

Modern evangelism and calls to repentance are subject to the same rules. A repentant attitude takes a while to form. Twenty years isn’t unusual for this kind of attitude adjustment. It might be a little quicker nowadays (what isn’t?), but it still takes time.

This applies to both large and small scales. A nation’s attitude takes a while to change. A person’s attitude takes a while to change. Your personal mission field’s attitude takes a while to change.

This can be annoying, but there’s one advantage—slower things are easier to track. Attitudes usually don’t evolve too fast for you to keep up.

The other thing that’s the same today as back then is the slow growth of reputation. It takes time to earn the right to be heard. Don’t rush the message; the LORD’s timetable is long.

Preaching the gospel before the right time expends something. Be sensitive to the LORD’s leading.

2 1 Samuel 7:5–11

And Samuel said, “Gather all Israel to Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you.” So they gathered together at Mizpah, drew water, and poured it out before the LORD. And they fasted that day, and said there, “We have sinned against the LORD.” And Samuel judged the children of Israel at Mizpah.

Now when the Philistines heard that the children of Israel had gathered together at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the children of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines. So the children of Israel said to Samuel, “Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us, that He may save us from the hand of the Philistines.”

And Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. Then Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him. Now as Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel. But the LORD thundered with a loud thunder upon the Philistines that day, and so confused them that they were overcome before Israel. And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and drove them back as far as below Beth Car.

In the first verse in today’s passage (1 Samuel 7:5), what was Samuel supposed to pray for?

The answer is in the previous passage: *Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, “If you return to the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from among you, and prepare your hearts for the LORD, and serve Him only; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines.”* — 1 Samuel 7:3g

And how does God answer this prayer?

Backwards. The next thing that happens is the Philistines attack. The Israelites must be wondering what went wrong. Now they’re afraid and ask Samuel to pray (even more) that they be saved.

But what God has up His sleeve is the deliverance they asked for.

He’s just doing it His way instead of theirs.

The amazing thing isn’t that God answers our prayers backwards, upside down, or slant; it’s that He sometimes grants our requests straight up.

My experience is that these straight answers often teach by revealing the error or uselessness of the request. That is, God often mocks my prayer requests by granting them.

Worldly treasures do not satisfy. Unfortunately, we can memorize this until we’re blue in the face and still not really get it. Only by being unsatisfied with something we thought we “needed” do we learn that our need was silly.

So, even when God doesn’t seem to be “creative” in the way He answers our prayers, He’s still being creative.

3 1 Samuel 7:12–14

Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen, and called its name Ebenezer, saying, “Thus far the LORD has helped us.”

So the Philistines were subdued, and they did not come anymore into the territory of Israel. And the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. Then the cities which the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath; and Israel recovered its territory from the hands of the Philistines. Also there was peace between Israel and the Amorites.

The Hebrew that’s translated as, “*Thus far*,” (הַיְנַחֵם, *ahd hay-nah*) is vague. It’s most literally translated as “until here.” (“Thus far” is a fair colloquial English rendering.) Samuel is being careful to only say what he knows, avoiding any promises about the future.

Then comes the interesting part—God does exactly what Samuel was careful to avoid saying. He grants them future, long-term help. *And the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel.*

This illustrates how the LORD rewards genuineness (just as He hates phoniness).

He loves to bless His people, when it’s appropriate.

This is important in prayer. Be yourself.

If you’re angry, don’t pretend that you aren’t. If you’re down, lament. (Remember the whole book of Lamentations is inspired scripture. Lamenting must be okay.)

If you’re puzzled, ask for clarification. If you see how it’s all glorious, worship. If you don’t, don’t be phony about it.

God desires relationship with you. Masks get in the way.

On the back of a one-dollar bill there’s something similar to Samuel’s careful statement. Above the pyramid are the words ANNUIT CŒPTIS, which means, “He has favored our undertakings.”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annuit_c%C5%93ptis

It’s a vague reference to divine providence—much more vague than, say, the appeal to “the Protection of Divine Providence” at the end of the Declaration of Independence.

However, the implied prayer in the Declaration does seem to have been answered.

To God be the glory.

4 1 Samuel 7:15–8:5

And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. He went from year to year on a circuit to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah, and judged Israel in all those places. But he always returned to Ramah, for his home was there. There he judged Israel, and there he built an altar to the LORD.

Now it came to pass when Samuel was old that he made his sons judges over Israel. The name of his firstborn was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beersheba. But his sons did not walk in his ways; they turned aside after dishonest gain, took bribes, and perverted justice.

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, “Look, you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.”

All is well with Samuel and with Israel under his leadership. He acts much like a modern circuit court judge, traveling from town to town. The Philistines are kept out of the picture the whole time. Things are good.

Then it all comes crashing down. Sixty to zero in one generation. His sons are as corrupt as Eli’s sons were. Samuel must remember how God responded to that case; He used Samuel to deliver the verdict.

So, Samuel is under a lot of stress. He knows something needs to change.

But then disaster strikes. The *elders of Israel* say, *make us a king*. And the reason they give is even worse. They want a king *to judge us like all the nations*. Ouch.

The phrase *all the nations* refers to other nations. Why would *the elders of Israel* want Israel to be more like the other nations?

That’s nuts.

Many of the great tragedies of life involve people not appreciating what they have. The result is they either trade something precious for something less or even just throw it away. Here we see Israel not appreciating their special status; so they want to throw it away and be like other nations.

They forget that the other nations are their enemies. They are enemies because they’re evil. They worship gods that are not gods. They practice hideous sacrifices. How could *the elders of Israel* want to have anything to do with that?

There isn’t a simple answer. Some kind of strange psychological effect causes people to want change when they’re dissatisfied. They often don’t weigh their options rationally.

This is especially true of divorce. It’s oversold. People are often shocked by the costs—when it’s too late.

Divorce isn’t the only example. A rule of life worth memorizing is, “Don’t throw it all away.”

5 1 Samuel 8:6–18

But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.” So Samuel prayed to the LORD. And the LORD said to Samuel, “Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt, even to this day—with which they have forsaken Me and served other gods—so they are doing to you also. Now therefore, heed their voice. However, you shall solemnly forewarn them, and show them the behavior of the king who will reign over them.”

So Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who asked him for a king. And he said, “This will be the behavior of the king who will reign over you: He will take your sons and appoint them for his own chariots and to be his horsemen, and some will run before his chariots. He will appoint captains over his thousands and captains over his fifties, will set some to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and some to make his weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers, cooks, and bakers. And he will take the best of your fields, your vineyards, and your olive groves, and give them to his servants. He will take a tenth of your grain and your vintage, and give it to his officers and servants. And he will take your male servants, your female servants, your finest young men, and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take a tenth of your sheep. And you will be his servants. And you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, and the LORD will not hear you in that day.”

You can almost feel the grand sweep of history in this passage. The LORD is letting Israel make a huge mistake. Samuel is right; having a king will be a great burden. Besides, having a king won't solve their problems anyway.

But they need to do it to learn an essential lesson—that nothing less than a savior will do.

That's not just an essential lesson; it's the essential lesson. It's what the Old Testament is all about.

The whole Old Testament points to Christ.

The LORD is using a brutal teaching method that would be later explained by President Grant.

“I know no method to secure the repeal of bad or obnoxious laws so effective as their stringent execution.” — Ulysses S. Grant

The cold truth is that some kinds of learning can't be made easy. Learning usually takes hard work, and sometimes it even takes pain. The difference is in the kind of learning.

The toughest kind of learning, the kind that's painful, is unlearning. It's hard enough to learn something new, but it's harder to change something that you thought you knew. We don't let go of ideas easily.

It will take a long time for Israel to unlearn the idea that having a king would be a good thing.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. When have you seen patience in evangelism rewarded? Impatience punished?
2. What's the most creative answer to prayer you've seen?
3. Have you ever lamented in prayer?
4. What do we underappreciate?
5. What has been your biggest change of mind?

Items for prayer: