

1 SAMUEL: THE DEATH OF THE FLESH

by Ray C. Stedman

The Old Testament is wonderfully illuminating in presenting case studies in normal and abnormal living. Anyone who has taken a course in psychology knows that in the text the case studies illustrate the principles being taught, in terms of real people and incidents. The whole of the Old Testament is just like that. It is filled with the most fascinating case studies illustrating the principles God wishes us to know. Sometimes, however, they are hidden in enigmas. If you like such things as cryptograms and crossword puzzles and riddles, you will enjoy ferreting out these truths of the Old Testament. You have to read your Bible (at least figuratively) with the Old Testament in one hand and the New Testament in the other, comparing them constantly in your mind. The Old Testament accounts illustrate the truths that are set forth in the New Testament. In them you will meet yourself and your own case study.

First Samuel is the story of two men, Saul and David. These two men illustrate for us the two principles in the heart of every Christian believer seeking to walk before God. They are the principle of flesh and the principle of faith. Saul is the man of the flesh, and David is the man of faith; the carnal believer and the spiritual believer. The fact that both of these men were kings beautifully illustrates the supremacy of the will in human life. As the book of Esther shows, each one of us is a king over a kingdom. Our will is supreme in our life. Even the Spirit of God does not violate it. We are ruling over the kingdom of our lives and our affairs, over those things that concern us personally and also the things that have an impact and influence upon others. What you, the king, say and do, influences the whole kingdom over which you reign.

Here, in these two kings, the two principles which are in conflict in your life and in mine are illustrated. We see in Saul the ruin caused by the will that is set on the flesh. In David you see beautifully illustrated the blessing which is brought by the mind that is set on the Spirit. "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." (Rom. 8:6) This conflict is illustrated in the book of 1 Samuel in the lives of these two men.

The book actually begins with the story of a third man, Samuel, who is the human expression of the voice of God to both Saul and David. (You and I have in our lives the expression to us of God's will by the word of God in those men and leaders in the church who teach and explain the word to us. God speaks to us objectively as well as subjectively. This is what is pictured by Samuel.) These three men mark off the divisions of the book. The first seven chapters give us the life of Samuel. Chapters 8 through 15 present King Saul, the man of the flesh. Then in chapters 16 through 31, David, the man of faith, is eminent as an illustration of the mind set on the Spirit.

Samuel was the last of the judges and the first of the prophets. The events of this book take place right after Israel had passed through some three hundred or more years of the rule of the judges. (During that time the little episode of Ruth occurred.) Samuel is the chosen instrument of God to close out the realm of the judges and to introduce the beginning of the prophetic ministry and the monarchy.

In the beginning, there is the wonderful story of a barren women, Hannah, the wife of a man named Elkanah. This man had two wives. The other wife was a prolific woman, who taunted and mocked Hannah in her barrenness. The barrenness of Hannah is very symbolic, coming as it does at the beginning of this book, because it illustrates the spiritual state of Israel at this time. This people to whom God had manifested himself had fallen into a state of utter infertility and barrenness. The priesthood which God had set up with the tabernacle and the rituals -- the means by which the people would have access to him -- was beginning to disappear. The cause for this failure is found in the song that Hannah sang after her prayer to God was answered and God gave her the boy, Samuel. Every woman ought to memorize this glorious song. In it, Hannah indicates the problem with which the book is essentially concerned:

**"Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;**

**for the Lord to a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.
The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength." {1 Sam 2:3-4 RSV}**

The rest of the song magnificently sets forth the ability of God to exalt the lowly and to cast down the proud.

In this book is set forth the eternal conflict between the proud heart which finds confidence in itself and its ability to do things, and the humble spirit which looks to God in utter dependence, receiving all the fullness of divine blessing. That was the problem with Israel. The priesthood was failing, not because there was anything wrong with the priesthood (which was a picture of the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ), but because the people refused to bow before the Lord. They refused to come for cleansing and to turn from idolatrous worship. As a result, their access to God was cut off. The priesthood, then, was about to pass out of the picture as an effective means of mediation between the people and God.

At this point we have the familiar account of Samuel's birth and childhood. When Samuel is just a little lad he is brought to the temple and dedicated to God. He becomes the voice of God to Eli the priest and is given a message of judgment. Later he becomes the voice of God to the nation -- especially to the two kings, Saul and David. The first seven chapters tell us the story of Israel's fall into decay. The ark of God, the very place where God himself wrote his name and where his presence dwelt, was taken captive by the Philistines into their own country. Eli the priest, because he did not make his sons obey him (which is a powerful word of warning about juvenile delinquents today) -- even though his own heart was right -- finds that his priesthood is taken away from him. And when Eli's grandson is born, his mother names him Ichabod, which means "the glory has departed." Here Israel reaches one of the lowest states in its national history.

We read then of the entrance of King Saul. In chapter 8, verses 4 and 5, the people demand to be given a king like all the other nations:

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, "Behold, you are old and your own do not walk in your ways; now appoint for us a king to govern us like as the nations." {1 Sam 8:4-5 RSV}

The principle of the flesh is at work in the nation of Israel to destroy its communion, its fellowship and its enjoyment of God's blessing. The same principle is interwoven in every Christian life, and it may be expressed in many ways, which are clearly indicated throughout this book. The first is that they be given an authority like all the other nations. In other words, the desire of the flesh is to be religious in a manner accepted by the world, to conduct its business like the rest of the world does. If our mind is set on the flesh, we want to interject the principle of business acumen into the conduct of the church. We wish to adopt the salesmanship tactics of the world. We no longer rely upon the strategy of the Holy Spirit but we appoint a committee to plan out the program. Then we ask God to come and bless it and make it work. It is our program instead of his. This principle is continually at work, reflected in Israel's rejection of the authority and the sovereignty of God and their desire to be ruled like all the nations.

Well, this request was granted by God. Samuel was displeased when they asked for a king, because he knew that this was not God's program. Samuel prayed to the Lord and the Lord said:

"Hearken to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds which they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, hearken to their voice; only, you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them." {1 Sam 8:7-9 RSV}

This is always the way of God. I think one of the greatest lessons we can learn about God is that if we want something badly enough, he will give it to us. But we must also be ready to face the consequences. This is true about everything in life, isn't it? Suppose I have before me two glasses filled with liquid that both look like water. One of them is water and the other is poison. I have a choice to make between drinking the poison or

the water. If I choose to drink the poison, I no longer have any influence over what happens. The results are inevitable. Once I have made the choice, then I must accept the sequence of events that follows. All through the scriptures we find that this is the way God deals with men. If we want something badly enough, we can have it. But when we get it, we won't want it. If we start hungering and thirsting and clamoring after what we want as these people did, instead of relying upon God to give us what we need, we will discover that what we desired is no longer what we want. Our only recourse is to come back to God in repentance and ask him to give us what we need.

I will never forget hearing Dr. Ironside tell of an incident in the life of Dr. William Evans of the Hollywood Presbyterian Church. His little girl, who was about eight years of age, came home and said to him, "Daddy, I want to get some ballbearing skates. All the other children have ballbearing skates and that is what I want." He said, "But dear, you have a pair of skates." She replied, "Yes, I know Daddy, but they are not ballbearing skates. They are rollerbearing skates. They won't go as fast as the others will." He was a minister and did not have too great an income so he said, "Well, my dear, I'm afraid you will have to make do with the rollerbearing skates. We simply can't afford to buy any others right now." But she wouldn't let him be. That night when he came home from his work, there was a little note at his place on the table. It said, "Dear Daddy, I still want the ballbearing skates." When he went to bed that night there was another note pinned to his pillow. It said, "Daddy, would you buy me some ballbearing skates?"

Well, he did what we would have done; he scraped up the money somehow and got the ballbearing skates. When he gave them to her, she was delighted. She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him and kissed him and thanked him. Then she put on the ballbearing skates and started out the gate and down the sidewalk and around the corner. That was the last time they ever saw her well and alive. As she went around the corner, the skates were too much for her and she slipped and fell down, hitting her head against the sidewalk. They brought her home in a coma. She died at the hospital before the night was out. "Since then," Dr. Evans said, "when I want something of God and it seems as though he is not willing that I should have it but I keep crying out for it, the Spirit of God reminds me, "Are you asking for ballbearing skates?" " This is what happened in Israel. It is a principle that is at work in all of our lives.

The tremendous story of Saul follows here. It is a fascinating story of a young man who, like so many young people today, was living his life without any regard or concern for what God wanted him to do. He was busy with his father in the donkey business. And donkeys take a lot of tending. Samuel was running and judging the country and they were glad to leave that all up to him. Saul and his father were too busy with the donkeys. It is wonderful to trace God's dealings with this man and to see how he reached him. Here is a young man who shuts God out of his thinking, has no time for him nor any real interest in him. We all know people like Saul. How do you think God reached him? Well, he did the very obvious thing. He went into the donkey business himself. He lost Saul's donkeys for him. When the donkeys strayed away, Saul was vexed. It didn't occur to him that God was involved; he thought only that someone had left the pasture gate open, so he set out to look for the donkeys.

After a long and fruitless search, he came to the town where Samuel lived. In chapter 5 he was about to give up and go back home, when his servant said to him, "Let us go and ask the man of God who lives here where the donkeys are." Saul was not very anxious to do this. In fact, he desired to stay about as far away from the prophet as possible, because prophets were a very disturbing kind of people, and he wanted to get back home. But the servant prevailed on him to go up to see Samuel, and to Saul's amazement, Samuel was expecting him. God had told Samuel the day before that there would be a young man named Saul appearing upon his doorstep. Samuel had a great dinner prepared for Saul and thirty invited guests; and Saul, to his consternation, was the guest of honor. He hardly knew what was happening. Those troublesome donkeys had got him into all this and he wanted to get out of it as fast as possible. But Samuel took him aside as they finished the dinner and announced to him a stunning thing: "God has anointed you," Samuel said, "to be the king over Israel." (10:1)

Saul had been out looking for donkeys but ended up the king of Israel. And he wasn't at all interested in the job. But Samuel told him that he would have three signs indicating that God was with him, and then sent him home. Sure enough, each one of these signs was fulfilled: one, two, three. The first one was that he would meet a band of prophets and the Spirit of God would come upon him and he would begin to prophesy. When

Saul began to prophesy along with all the other seminary students -- all those who were in this school of the prophets -- the word went out through all of Israel. The people said, "Is Saul, the son of Kish, also one of the prophets?" (10:11) As Saul went on toward his home, he met his uncle, who said, "What has been happening?" Saul said, "I went out looking for the donkeys and I ran into Samuel, and he told me that the donkeys are safe at home." (10:14-16) Not one word about the anointing and the new commission that God had given him. Saul was out to make the most of his life and he was not interested in what God wanted him to do, unless he could use God for his own purposes. So he said nothing.

But Samuel wasn't through. He told Israel that God had hearkened to their plea, and would give them a king according to their desire. Samuel calls all the people together to cast lots for the choice of the king. The lot is cast first upon the tribes and the tribe of Benjamin is taken. Then upon the family group and the family of Kish is taken. And then upon the individual and Saul is taken. The word went out, "Where is Saul?" No one could find him anywhere. Finally the Lord said, "He is hiding among the baggage." Sure enough, that is where they found him.

Now why was he hiding? Was it because he was so modest that he didn't want to have anybody make a fuss over him? Was it because he was shy and diffident? No, the record indicates that Saul was hiding because he was finding it rather inconvenient to do what God wanted. He wanted to live his own life his own way and he was trying to get away from the call of God.

But God had called him and he was crowned king. As he stood among the people, they raised a great shout and said, "What a king!" He looked like the very picture of a king: head and shoulders above everyone else, handsome as could be, a very wise young man in many ways and fair-minded in seeking justice. But now there is trouble with the Ammonite people up in the north. Saul sends out word to all the people of Israel to come together, and to his great delight, thirty-six thousand people respond to his call. They march up and utterly destroy the Ammonites in a great victory. And Saul begins to feel that maybe this matter of serving God is going to be all right. Maybe he can use it for his own advancement after all. But the next battle he faces is with the Philistines. Now the Philistines aren't a mere tribe of people who are tough only in their own limited area like the Ammonites. Saul is up against a nation which was the equivalent of the Soviet Union or the United States -- one of the major powers of the world. The Philistines, when they heard of the little difficulty that Saul's son, Jonathan, had caused when he defeated their army at Geba, gathered thirty thousand chariots of iron, six thousand horsemen, and a multitude of people so vast that even the Philistines could not number them.

When Saul looked out his window and saw this great horde of people advancing upon him, he realized that this job of being king was not totally delightful. So he sent out the word again through all Israel expecting that the people would rally to his support as before. He waited, and he waited, and he waited. Finally a thousand people showed up, and then another thousand, and then another thousand. This happened to be the three thousand standing troops that he had already selected and he kept waiting for the others to come. No more came. He compared this pitiful three thousand soldiers with the multitude of the Philistines' tremendous force and sent for Samuel. Samuel told him to wait at Gilgal for him to offer a burnt offering to the Lord. The man of flesh depends upon his own resources until he gets into trouble, and then he calls upon the Lord. But God was ahead of Saul as usual, and Samuel delayed coming. While Saul waited, he kept watching his soldiers begin to slip away one by one and go back home. So the three thousand soldiers dwindled to two thousand, and then to one thousand, until finally only about 600 men were left. By this time, Saul was getting desperate, and when Samuel had not come after five or six days Saul took it upon himself to offer the burnt offering. The moment he had finished, Samuel came walking up. The old prophet was stern-faced as he said, "What have you been doing?" Saul said, "Well, I waited for you, but when I saw that the people were going back to their homes, I thought I ought to take action, so I finally forced myself to do the offering. I knew we did not dare go out to battle without going through this kind of a ritual and since you weren't here, I did it myself." (13:12) On hearing this, Samuel said to Saul:

"But now your kingdom shall not continue; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart; and the Lord has appointed him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you." {1 Sam 13:14 RSV}

It was thus prophesied that Saul's kingdom would be taken from him.

As we read on, we find that God gave a great victory through Jonathan's faith and delivered the people from this vast horde of Philistines. When at last the battle was won, Saul built an altar. It is the first altar that we are specifically told King Saul ever built. Here is a man who thinks the outward marks of faith are all that are necessary. If you go through the external ritual -- if you belong to a church, if you sing the hymns, if you say the right things, if you confess the right creed -- that is all God expects. That is the principle of the man of the flesh. But God says that when you act on that basis, your reign over your own life is taken away. You no longer have authority in your own kingdom. You become the victim and the slave of an inexorable force which will grind you under its heel and bring you into subjection to it. This is what every man or woman who lives by the flesh sooner or later discovers. When we yield ourselves to that which we obey, as Paul puts it in Romans, we become slaves of that thing. (Rom. 6:16) This is what happens to Saul. After he builds an altar, God brings him to his knees, and gives him one last chance. At the beginning of chapter 15:

And Samuel said to Saul, "The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore hearken to the words of the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'I will punish what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way, when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and smite Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.'" {1 Sam 15:1-3 RSV}

This was Saul's last chance, because if Saul had obeyed this command, he would have demonstrated that he was ready to allow the cross to do its work against the flesh -- to crucify it and to put it to death. Amalek is a picture throughout all of the scripture of the principle of the flesh which opposes the things of God. Amalek was that people about whom Moses had said to Israel, "Remember Amalek unto all generations. He will never make peace with Amalek." (Ex. 17:16) And Saul was given this remission to carry out. But did he?

And Saul defeated the Amalekites, from Havalah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt. And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them; all that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed. {1 Sam 15: 7-9 RSV}

Worthless in whose eyes? I wonder if it wasn't the donkeys that Saul wanted to save. After all, he appreciated farm animals. He probably reasoned, "Why should we destroy these perfectly good animals?" He presumed to find something good in what God had declared utterly bad. Paul wrote that we must "put off the old nature" {Col 3:9 RSV} with its ways of jealousy, perverseness, bitterness, envy, anger, intemperance, selfishness and all these things. But the mind of the flesh says, "Oh, some of this is worth keeping. I can hardly be a real personality if I don't have a hot temper and tell people off once in awhile." So we presume to find good in what God has declared bad.

The result was that Samuel came to Saul and asked him, "How have you been doing?" Saul said, "Wonderful. I have done everything the Lord said. I killed all the Amalekites and destroyed everything just as the Lord said." Samuel cocked his ear and said, "What do I hear? What is that sound of bleating and lowing outside the window? Why are those animals out there?" Saul said, "Well it is true that I spared a few; I thought God would be pleased if I dedicated them to him." That is an excuse we use, isn't it? What we desire to keep, we pretend to dedicate to God. This is what Saul tried too.

And Samuel said, "Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? {1 Sam 15:17a RSV}

Why did you not obey the voice of the Lord?" {1 Sam 15:19b RSV}

And Saul said to Samuel, "I have obeyed the voice of the Lord." {1 Sam 15:20a RSV}

**And Samuel said,
"Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,
as in obeying the voice of the Lord?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
and to hearken than the fat of rams
For rebellion is as the sin of divination,
and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.
Because you have rejected the word of the Lord,
he has also rejected you from being king." {1 Sam 15:22-23 RSV}**

No man can walk in the authority and the freedom that God has intended for his children when he rejects the authority of the Spirit of God in his life. That is primarily the story of Saul.

The story of David, starting in chapter 16, is the story of the man after God's own heart. There are tremendous lessons in the accounts of David, his rejection, and his exile. He was chosen from the eight sons of Jesse. The seven eldest sons passed before Samuel and each one looked like a king in the making until God said to Samuel, "This is not the one that I have chosen." And last came the youngest and the skinniest one of all -- David. God put his seal upon him. His choice was not according to outward appearance -- God looked instead at his heart.

David was not set on the throne immediately as Saul was, but was tested and proved by struggle and adversity. This is the principle that God often follows with the man who learns to walk by faith. He is put through a time of obscurity, of testing, and of problems. Everything seems to go against him until at last he recognizes the great principle by which God's activity is always carried on -- man can do nothing in himself but only in complete and utter dependence upon the God who indwells him. This is what David learned even as a shepherd boy, so that he could say, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul." (Ps. 23:1-3a)

We come to the testing of David as he comes face to face with the giant, Goliath. Israel was held in fear and cowardice by this giant who paraded up and down between the armies, taunting and mocking the impotence of the Israelites. No one dared to do a thing about him. He strutted in arrogant pride up and down, beating his chest and demanding they send someone out to fight. And no one dared to go. When little David came from his flocks to bring food to his brothers, he found the whole camp of Israel plunged into gloom and despair. He came in and asked, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine who dares to defy the armies of the living God?" (17:26) That is always the outlook of faith. It is never shaken by the circumstances.

Word is brought to Saul of this young man in their midst. Saul asks David what he wants to do. David says, "I'll go out and fight him." Saul, thinking to be helpful, puts his armor upon David. Now Saul was about one and a half feet taller than David and the armor on the young lad began to clank and get in his way. David tried to move around and couldn't even take a step. Finally he said, "Bring me a can opener and get me out of this." David then went down to the brook and got five smooth stones. Why five? A little later in the book of 2 Samuel you will read that Goliath had four brothers. That is why he took five. He was prepared for the whole family!

David went out, threw the sling around his head, and Goliath fell to the ground with a stone right between his eyes. Someone has said his last words were, "Nothing like this has ever entered my mind before." Anyhow he went down. David took Goliath's own sword and cut off his head. What a glorious picture this is of him who went up against the great enemy of mankind face to face and slew him with his own sword. We read in Hebrews 2:14 that by death the Lord Jesus slew him that had the power of death, even the Devil. David becomes here a picture not only of Christ, but also of the believer who lives the life of Christ.

This event is followed by Saul's great jealousy of David. From chapter 18 on we have the story of the growing persecution of David by Saul -- a living illustration of the principle that Paul declares in Galatians. He says,

... as at that time, he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now. {Gal 4:29 RSV}

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh...to prevent you from doing what you would. {Gal 5:17 RSV}

So Saul persecuted David and tried to kill him. It was during this time that David wrote so many of the Psalms -- those wonderful songs that speak of God's faithfulness in the midst of distressing conditions. David was pursued and finally exiled from the presence of Saul.

In chapters 21 and 22 we find the fullness of God's abundant provision made for him even in his exile. He is given the very holy bread of the tabernacle. This bread, representing the presence of God, is a picture of that secret ministering to everyone who is undergoing difficult problems, yet looking to God for deliverance. To such God gives the hidden bread, the bread from the very table of the Lord himself. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." (John 6:35) "As I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me." (John 6:57) In his exile, David the king had a prophet, Gad, and a priest, Abiathar -- whose resources were available to him even though he was hunted like a bird upon the mountains -- just as when you are in trouble, hardly able to work out your own problems yourself, you can find in the Lord Jesus Christ (who is our prophet, our priest, and our king) all that it takes to bring you through the time of trouble to God's open door for you. This is what happened to David. He refused to act for himself. Twice he spared Saul as God delivered him into his hand. In a remarkable spirit of faith he waited for God to work out the problems.

At the end of the book, we see the end of the man of flesh. Saul, out of desperation, descends to witchcraft to try to determine the mind of the Lord after the Spirit of God has departed from him. Although witchcraft was utterly forbidden to the people of God, Saul calls up the witch of Endor and tries to get her to call Samuel up. God overrules this and sends, not an impersonating spirit, as the witch expected, but the true Samuel who announces Saul's impending death on the field of battle the next day.

True to the prophecy, Saul and his son Jonathan, David's bosom friend, are slain, and David, ever the man of faith, in the opening chapter of 2 Samuel extolls them both as men used of God, despite their many weaknesses. The death of Saul well illustrates Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 3 concerning the carnal believer and his work, "If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames."

So Saul joins Samuel in the life beyond, but as one whose earthly life is essentially wasted and whose opportunity for service in glory is thereby diminished.

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