

## "God and Family"

Two weeks ago we learned about Samson, who was one of the judges in the Book of Judges. During that period, Israel was ruled by spiritual leaders known as the judges. But it turned out that even their leadership was not enough to maintain order among the people of Israel, and the Book of Judges concludes by giving us the following description of the state they were in at that time: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit" (Judges 21:25).

This verse shows us that 400 years of everyone doing "as they saw fit" have finally led them to a dead end. And the verse implies that this was because Israel had no king. If they were to have a king ruling over them, the people would no longer be able to do as they saw fit, but would have to obey what the king dictated. But this was what the people desired and so Israel was about to enter into a new era.

After the period of the judges came to an end, the first three kings of Israel, Saul, David, and Solomon, were anointed as king of Israel. When Saul became the first king of Israel, there was a man who became a central figure during that transition, and he was the last of the judges, a priest, and also a prophet; this man was Samuel. Today we will learn about Samuel from the Book of Samuel, named after this same prophet.

Two weeks ago when I delivered a message on Samson, I mentioned that even today, just like in the days of the judges, we do what we think is right in our own eyes. We live in a world that tells us it is okay to do whatever we see fit in the name of "freedom". And we saw that when we use this freedom to do what is right in our own eyes, we may not actually be doing what is right, but instead we are only doing what we want to do.

So why did the people of Israel wish to live under a king? In those days each of the tribes of Israel was governed by a leader of their clan, and in the days of the Biblical judges the people were periodically governed by a judge. But these leaders did not have full control over the entire nation of Israel, so when problems arose from within and they faced threats from without, they realized that they could not maintain order under their current social structure, and that led them to think that they needed a king to lead the whole nation.

We see the same thing happening today. As we see what's going on in the world today, we become concerned for the future of our country. Because of this we desire to have a

strong leader who can lead our nation. When the world seems to become more uncertain and unpredictable, our desire for strong leadership becomes even greater.

But what we must remember is that even our leaders, be they a king, president, or prime minister, even they are but a human being, and they too can only do what is right in their own eyes, and their decisions may not always be perfect. And it is possible that what is right in their own eyes is actually just what they feel like doing, and in the worst case that leader will govern according to their own personal agenda and the people will suffer as a result.

As the people of Israel realized their inability to maintain order, it was a perfect opportunity for them to turn back to God and return to the position they were meant to be in, but instead of turning back to God, they demanded to have a strong leader to rule over them. They were once united in their conviction that God alone was the King of Israel, but they have abandoned it in favor of a human king who will rule over them and decide the fate of their nation.

The Book of Samuel unfolds during such a time, and it begins by giving us an account of Samuel's birth. His mother Hannah prayed earnestly that God will give her a son and her prayer was answered when Samuel was born, so she dedicated Samuel to God by entrusting him to the high priest Eli, and Samuel served alongside Eli at the temple. For forty years Eli was the spiritual leader of Israel and he also had great influence in state affairs. He was well-known across the land of Israel and as high priest he entered the Most Holy Place inside the Tabernacle on behalf of all the people. Samuel lived under the same roof as Eli and grew up receiving training from him.

Eli was a respected figure among the people, but he had one problem. That problem was his relationship with his two sons. During that time, the succession of priests was hereditary, so Eli's sons were expected to succeed their father and they received his training alongside Samuel. But Eli's sons took for themselves the best portion of meat that was offered to God by the people, and when the people pointed out their wrongdoing, they threatened to take their meat by force. They also had relations with the women who served at the temple. This is why the Bible says "Eli's sons were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord" (1 Samuel 2:12). Although Eli was the high priest, he honored his sons more than God (1 Samuel 2:29), and he rebuked them only when he heard the people talking about them (1 Samuel 2:24), but even after knowing about their sins he failed to restrain them (1 Samuel 3:13).

Because of this, God decided to make Samuel the successor of Eli instead of his sons. When Samuel was still a boy serving under Eli, God spoke to him repeatedly during the night. Eli asked Samuel what God had said to him, and although it was difficult for Samuel, he tells Eli the message he had received from God: "12 At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end. 13 For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God, and he failed to restrain them. 14 Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, 'The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.'" (1 Samuel 3:12-14).

Eli knew why this was being told to him, so he made no objection. And just as it was told, Eli and his sons died a sad death, and Samuel succeeds Eli in becoming the leader of Israel. The Bible commends Samuel by saying "19 The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. 20 And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord" (1 Samuel 3:19-20).

So Samuel succeeded Eli as the priest and spiritual leader of the people. With Samuel as their new leader, it seemed as if everything will go smoothly without a king. But after several years have past, the elders of Israel came to Samuel to make a complaint: "4 So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. 5 They said to him, 'You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.'" (1 Samuel 8:4-5).

Samuel too had a problem. And what's remarkable is that he had the same exact problem as his mentor Eli. "1 When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as Israel's leaders. 2 The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. 3 But his sons did not follow his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice" (1 Samuel 8:1-3).

As a young boy, Samuel told Eli how God will judge his family for his sons' wickedness. From a young age, Samuel saw and heard about the sins of Eli's sons. As they lived under the same roof, Samuel must have seen how Eli failed to restrain his two sons. So he must have known why Eli's sons grew up to become disobedient toward God. But he too failed to raise his sons to walk in God's ways.

You may remember hearing a similar story not long ago. A few weeks back, I delivered a message on Moses' brother Aaron and his two sons. Although Aaron's sons were

expected to succeed their father's priestly office, they carelessly disobeyed God's command and ended up losing their lives. Being himself a priest, it was their father Aaron's responsibility to show them how to conduct themselves as priests.

In that message, we learned what happened when Moses went up to the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments from God. The people grew impatient as they waited for Moses to come down, so at Aaron's suggestion, they made and worshiped a golden calf and indulged in revelry. The Bible says that "25 Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies" (Exodus 32:25).

As a priest himself, Aaron was responsible for teaching his sons the high honor of being a priest, and to teach them that the most important thing was to fear and honor God, and that they must obey God's commandments with all their heart. Just as Aaron had let the people of Israel "get out of control" (Exodus 32:25), we can imagine that he let the same thing happen in his own family.

Family values are important to every race and culture. But no one prioritizes the family more than the Jewish people. Just by reading the Book of Genesis, we can tell that the Bible is the story of a family. The book begins with the story of Adam and Eve, then it goes on to tell us about the families of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Many Jews read the Book of Genesis from an early age and study it their whole life until they know it by heart. So it is no surprise that the Jewish people place great value on their relationship with their families.

Aaron, Eli, and Samuel were all expert scholars of the Bible, so they too must have known the importance it placed on the family. They must have also known the important role they had in their own family. But all three of them failed to prevent the problems that arose in their family.

On New Year's Day I delivered a message on how we are to live within the order created by God. In that message we learned that it is true that we were all created by God, and that all of Creation exists under His law and there is order in this universe, the best way for us to live in this world is to live according to the law of the One who created it. The further we stray from this order, the more disorderly our lives will become. We stray from that order when we do what is right in our own eyes, and the longer we persist in doing this, the more confusion it will bring into our lives.

Wherever there is order, things are not placed at random, but in order of importance. In the Gospel of Matthew we are told that Jesus had the following conversation with a teacher of the law:

"35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" 37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'" (Matthew 22:35-40).

In the Bible there are 248 positive commandments (things to do) and 365 negative commandments (things not to do), that make a total of 613 commandments, and Jesus said that out of all these commandments the first and greatest is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind", and the second is to "Love your neighbor as yourself". Then He went on to say that "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments". Here we must make a note of how Jesus taught the first and second commandments in order of priority.

This is the order by which God instructs us to live: first to love God and second to love your neighbor as yourself. Whatever age we live in, this is the unchanging order that has been set by God. And the first neighbor God commands us to love is our family.

This order has been set by the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and God wants us to live according to this order. In that order God is first, family is second, and everything else must come after these two.

If we live by this order of priority and make all of our decisions according to this order, it will protect us from straying out of the right path. There is no better way to live than to live by the rules set by the One who has the whole world in His hands. Once you know the assurance of having this order in your life, you will no longer wish to live outside of this order. That is because living without this order is like driving without a seat belt, and you would know the blessings this order can bring to your life.

Today we live in a hectic world, and every day we must go about our busy lives. So we may think its too difficult to fit God's order into our own "schedule". When you hear a message like this, some of you might think to yourself, "this is why I don't like religion, always preaching something that's out of touch with reality. How could I follow such an

order and still be able to put food on the table?"

But is that really the case? In fact, when we live outside of God's order, we actually end up with even greater problems than not having food on the table.

As some of you may know, my mother raised me as a single parent. Just like any other child, I loved and cherished my mom, but even mothers are only human and she too was not perfect. She was especially busy during my early years, both at home and at work, but she did the best she could to raise me. I imagine that there were times when she was too busy and exhausted to do her best as a mother. Needless to say, I too recognize that I am far from being a perfect husband, father, or son. I'm sure my family would all agree. But as imperfect as I am, I still strive to become a better husband and father.

Out of all the memories I have with my mom, there are two that I cannot forget. My mom was a pastor so on Sundays she would always be at church leading the worship service. But in Japan, the fall athletic festival at school (undou-kai) was always held on a Sunday. As a result, my mom was not able to come to the festival. I believe my mother has never seen me competing at these events. One of the main events at the athletic festival was the lunch break. During the lunch break, each family would sit and gather around a variety of foods to enjoy lunch with the whole family. But in my case, my mom was not there, so I would take the lunch my mom handed to me in the morning and go to where my friend and his family were, and they would let me join and I ate lunch with them. But a few minutes after we began eating, my mom, who just finished leading the worship service, came to join us. It only lasted for about 20 minutes, but we sat and ate together and then she went back to the church building where the church members were waiting for her. From the opening ceremony to the closing ceremony, all of my friends' parents were there to cheer them on. I on the other hand had only 20 minutes to spend with my mom. But those 20 minutes were more than enough for me.

There is another story I'd like to share. This was when I was still in grade school, a restless youngster. Like most boys, I loved professional wrestling, so every Friday night and Saturday evening I turned on the TV to watch the wrestling program that was being aired, and when I played with my friends we would practice wrestling moves on each other. I was so full of energy and even with all the wrestling I did at school, I still had plenty of energy left when I got back home. If I had a father, he probably would have let me wrestle with him, but as you know I grew up without a father. But one day when I got home, my mom volunteered to let me practice my figure-four leg lock on her (many

of you know my mother, and might find it hard to believe that she actually let me do this). Of course, this did not happen every night, but we did this for about ten minutes a day for two or three days. But to this day I could not forget those times I spent with my mom and I will continue to cherish those memories. As it is often said, I believe that what matters is not really the duration but the quality of the time we spend with our family.

At times my mother poured all her energy into evangelism and pastoral work. She was usually not home when I got back from school, and sometimes she would get on her bicycle to go on a visit far away and would not come home even after the sun had gone down. During those times I did feel lonely, but even as a child I sensed how determined she was, in that she would even put aside her own son to dedicate herself to the ministry. As I saw her uncompromising dedication, I could tell that she was "the real thing".

After coming to the States, I heard about a pastor who took a Sunday off to go watch his child's soccer game (I'm sure he didn't do this without notice and must have found someone else to lead the service in his place). He was only doing what he saw fit, and he may have had some reasons we don't know about so I cannot judge him.

But there is something very important that seems to have gone unnoticed. Even though dad and mom had to skip service, the child must have been happy to see them at the game. But in exchange for that child's happiness, the parents are sending the the following message to the child; that the soccer game is more important than God, and that they could put God aside whenever they feel like it. In this way, the order which puts God has been lost. Things may seem alright at first. But when this order is lost, the painful consequences will come to haunt us afterwards.

At times, we must fully dedicate ourselves to serving the Lord, even if it means sacrificing the time we spend with our children, for that is the only way we can show them what authentic faith looks like. And if we follow that with spending quality time with our children, we will be able to earn their respect and understanding.

"11 These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. 12 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Corinthians 10:11-12).

All three of the great spiritual leaders we saw today faced problems in their family, and

the reason their stories have been recorded in the Bible is for us to learn from their examples and heed their warnings.

We should note that even as the nation of Israel was going through major changes, the Bible's main focus was on the individuals and their families who were being affected by those changes. We humans dream of accomplishing great things, whether it's leading a nation, founding a company, or starting a new project. But the Bible tells us that there is an even greater task before us and that is to love and care for the family God has entrusted to each one of us.

So why not give this a try? When you live by the order which God has given us and put God first, family second, and everything else third, you will begin to see changes in your life. You'll also notice that the problem of not having enough time will somehow solve itself. In fact you will realize that you lose more time when you do what is right in your own eyes and live by your own order of priority. When we think of the time and energy we will spend in trying to deal with the problems that will arise as a result, that in itself should make us want to reorganize our lives according to that order so that we can get the most out of this life given to us.

We cannot undo history, but if Eli and Samuel were able to maintain order in their own family, perhaps it wouldn't have been necessary for Israel to have a king. In this way, what goes on in our homes has a direct effect on the state of our nation. Each household may be small in size, but a family is the base unit of society, and the sum of all families is what makes up a nation. We hear calls for peace in our nation, but that could only be realized by first having the peace of God in our homes. We cannot go back into the past and redo our lives. But it is never too late to begin again. So let us start by readjusting our lives to live by God's order of priority. I would like to close this message with a quote from the famous author of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, C.S. Lewis:

**"When I have learnt to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now. In so far as I learn to love my earthly dearest at the expense of God and instead of God, I shall be moving towards the state in which I shall not love my earthly dearest at all. When first things are put first, second things are not suppressed but increased."**

Translated by Keita Machida