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ISRAEL'S WRONG COURSE

- I SAM. 8:10-22. - JULY 5. -

Golden Text: – "By me kings reign, and princes decree justice." – Prov. 8:51.

THE International Lesson Studies now return to Israel's history at the point discontinued last December – Samuel's judgeship. It will be remembered that Israel's progress under the judges for 450 years had not been very brilliant. Their government was that of a Republic under divine autocracy and law supervision. They were not a warlike people, and under the divine Covenant were merely assisted in conquering the promised land, in proportion as they were faithful and obedient to the Lord. In consequence many of the Canaanites still possessed strong-walled cities in their very midst, including Jerusalem, which was not conquered until the seventh year of King David's reign. Indeed, so far from becoming nationally great the Israelites had experienced some severe defeats in battle with neighboring nations, particularly the Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites, etc. In all they had experienced some eighteen periods of reverse and subjection, during which they were obliged to pay tribute.

Israel's national organization in the times of the judges was merely a voluntary and sentimental one. In reality each tribe managed its own affairs within its own border, and the heads of the tribes constituted its judges in ordinary affairs. The only thing which cemented the union between these tribes was the oneness of their speech and blood; but above all, the oneness of their hope toward God, based first upon the Covenant made with Abraham, "In thy Seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed." This promise was understood to include the nation of Israel –

cemented as a nation by the Law Covenant, which was instituted through Moses its Mediator and which bound the nation to Jehovah as his people and servants, and Jehovah to that nation as its Law-Giver and King. The divine promise to Israel was that so long as they should walk in the statutes of the divine Law they would be God's peculiar people and receive his peculiar blessings in all their temporal affairs as well as in their higher interests of character development. But if they should neglect him and his statutes and ordinances he would chasten them with pestilences, with captivities, etc. Nevertheless, if they should repent and cry unto the Lord and seek again to do his will and to obey his laws, he would hearken unto them and raise up for them deliverers, who as his representatives, would judge them, i.e., would see that they obtained deliverance, help, instruction, guidance. – Judges 2:16,18.

THEY DESIRED A KING

In harmony with this arrangement Eli had been a judge in Israel of recognized divine appointment, but because of Israel's unfaithfulness captivity to the Philistines ensued at the time of Eli's death. For quite a number of years Israel was subject to the Philistines. Meantime Samuel taught the people and urged them to put away their strange gods and to serve Jehovah only. He assured them that through this turning to the Lord would come divine blessing and favor. The people did so and gathered at Mizpah, where Samuel offered sacrifices on their behalf. Meantime the Philistines, learning of this gathering of the people, anticipated that it meant rebellion from their overlordship and came against them with an army. Then it was that the "Lord thundered with a great thunder on that day against the Philistines and discomfited them; and they were smitten before Israel." (I Sam. 7:10.) As a result, the Israelites were delivered, and Samuel was recognized by all the tribes as the divine representative and judge of Israel. Throughout his judgeship he traveled hither and

thither, apparently hearing and deciding such cases as were too difficult for the local judges. Under his wise judgeship the Israelites were greatly blessed; but with their returning prosperity came the ambition to be like the nations round about them – to be a united kingdom under the dominion of a king who would lead them in war and rule over them as an entire nation and centralize their power and energy. It is at this point that our lesson really begins.

From every worldly standpoint the people decided **[R4193 : page 189]** wisely, but from the divine standpoint unwisely. They appealed to Samuel as God's representative, to anoint over them a king, and thus establish in their midst a central authority. "Distance lends enchantment to the view," is a common adage, which was true in Israel's case. As they looked at the nations round about them they beheld the glories of the king, his armies, his officers, his chariots. Such kings were war-lords to their people, and more or less the dignity, authority and power of these kings represented these qualities in the nations under them. The Israelites saw not the grievous burdens under which many of the people labored as a result of such kingly dignity and glory. They saw merely the outward glitter, and not the anguish and labor of the people who supported these kings. As we look into the matter from the divine standpoint, we may reach the divine conclusion that they were making a poor choice when they preferred to have a kingdom rather than a republic under a divine King. The Lord had forewarned them through Moses of what would be the results if they should at any time choose a monarchical government rather than the one he had arranged for them. (Deut. 17:14-20.) From this standpoint we can see that the republic under divinely appointed judges tended to develop the Israelites individually, while the kingdom, no doubt, would tend to develop them along national lines. However, the individual development, through exercising liberty and individuality, would no doubt have prepared the people the better for the coming of Messiah and a

proper acceptance of him. There are chastisements and there are rewards under the divine kingship, and these, represented by the divinely raised up judges, would have developed them along the lines of individual responsibility and faith in God. Be it noticed also that in the Lord's promise of future blessings he declares, "I will restore your judges as at the first, and your lawgivers as at the beginning," thus clearly intimating that the republican form of government under divine supervision was superior to the subsequent kingly regime.

SAMUEL, THE FAITHFUL

Few characters shine out on the pages of history with such a pure light as does Samuel. When the Israelites made the request for a king Samuel was grieved. He knew he had served the people faithfully, that he had been self-sacrificing and generous to the last degree, spending his life in their interest. It seemed strange to him that a people should be so unthankful. But the Lord pointed out that their ingratitude was not to Samuel, but to their great King, Jehovah, saying, "They have not rejected thee but me." Nevertheless, the Lord bade Samuel hearken to the request of the people and anoint them a king, meantime assuring them that the truth of the divine prediction would be fully verified and that they were really choosing second best rather than the best. It was then that Samuel dismissed the people, assuring them that their request would be granted and a king anointed – such a one as the Lord would direct. Meantime Samuel wrote out for the people a statement or report of his judgeship, recorded in chapter 12. In this he shows most distinctly how he had avoided bribery and in everything had sought to do the will of the Lord, and he called upon the people to witness to the truthfulness of this, and they did, and attested it. What a noble character!

It was the custom for the candidates for office in the old Roman republic to go before the people clothed in a white

garment, thus representing their purity and spotlessness. But surely remarkably few men have ever left office spotless! In the majority of cases, no doubt, human weaknesses prevail to such a degree that the temptations of high position are overpowering. But notice that in Samuel's case this twelfth chapter and its witness to his purity, imply, figuratively, he had put on his white garment when he resigned his office, and all the people bore witness of his spotlessness, his integrity as a judge.

SAMUEL WAS WELL BORN

We must not forget that Samuel's training was with Eli, and that the sons of the latter turned out to be bribe-takers and generally scandalous in their misinterpretation of the divine law and justice. It was not, therefore, that Samuel was under the best environment and best teachers that would account for his grandeur of character and fidelity to principle. We must look further back, and find it in the fact that his parents consecrated him to the Lord, not only when a child but before his birth, and that this favorable influence contributed to his being well born in the reverence of the Lord. Undoubtedly the thoughts of parents, especially of the mother, during the period of a child's gestation, have great influence upon its mental character. Every child should be born with a large reverence for God, for justice, for truth, for goodness. To be thus born surely signifies a favorable start in the way of righteousness under present conditions. And we may be sure that the child thus begotten and born was well trained up to the time of his presentation to the Lord's service under Eli. Here we have a fresh testimony to the fact that if a child be trained up in the way he should go he is not likely to depart therefrom. Oh, that Christian parents could realize what a responsibility is in their hands in respect to the training of their children, and especially during their most impressionable years!

Respecting Samuel's moral heroism in promptly assisting to incorporate the kingdom, which would displace himself as the Lord's representative and judge in their midst, Professor Elmslie well says, "I think that one of the most magnanimous and majestic and heroic deeds ever done in our world's history was done by Samuel, when, convinced that it was the will of God, he set himself to do what no other man could do – to forsake all his past, to abandon all the lines of action on which he had worked through the best years of his life, and to put into other men's hands fresh possibilities. I call that conduct magnificent."

THE MANNER OF THE KING

In recounting to Israel the manner of a king we are not to understand that the Lord or Samuel his mouthpiece meant that the description given would be the proper one for a proper king; but rather that it would be the general course of a king, of any man raised to such a place of imperial power as the kings of olden time enjoyed. The wrong course of kings is traceable to three conditions: (1) All men are imperfect and fallen, hence any king chosen would be so, and it would be merely a question of the measure of imperfection and tendency to pride and selfishness and the abuse of power. (2) The imperfection of those over whom they reign is a factor, for the recognized [R4193 : page 190] imperfection makes possible and to some extent makes reasonable the usurpation of great power. (3) The Adversary's derangement of all earthly affairs, putting light for darkness and darkness for light, often makes it seem to rulers and to the ruled that an abuse of power is necessary and really to the advantage of the ruled.

IMMANUEL'S KINGDOM AUTOCRATIC

In view of the danger of placing great power in the hands of a ruler and the advisability of the republican form of government of the people, by the people and for the people, the question

arises, How will it be with Immanuel's Kingdom? We reply that the Scriptures teach that his Empire will be autocratic in the extreme. Nevertheless, no one who understands the matter need have any fear, as he who is to take the throne to be the Emperor of the World is the one who so loved the world as to give himself a ransom for all. Instead of his Empire being one of selfishness; which would ruin its subjects for its own aggrandizement, he has shown his Spirit to be the very reverse of this, in that he left the glory of the higher courts and humbled himself to a lower nature and became man's substitute, a ransom for man's penalty, "tasted death for every man." It is this One who is now highly exalted and appointed heir of all things.

Let us remember also that the Church now being selected from the world is composed only of such as have their Master's Spirit and delight to lay down their lives for the brethren and for the truth in cooperation with their Lord and Head and Bridegroom! Let us remember that according to the divine predestination none shall be of that elect class save those who are copies of God's dear Son, and that the tests of discipleship are such as to prove them – their love and loyalty to God, to the brethren, to their neighbors, yea, also to their enemies! Who need fear an autocratic government in the hands of such a glorious King? Indeed, we may say that such a government will be the most helpful, the most profitable, that the world could possibly have – wise, just, loving, helpful! While others are seeking for earthly honors, earthly name and fame and substance, let us who have been called to this high calling lay aside every weight and every besetting sin and, by the Lord's assistance, gain this great prize of joint-heirship with our Master in his Kingdom and have a share with him in the blessing and uplifting of mankind in general!

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