

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Thirtieth Week - Monday

A CHANGE DEMANDED

"Now it came to pass when Samuel was old that he made his sons judges over Israel. . . . 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.' But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, 'Give us a king to judge us.' So Samuel prayed to Yahweh. And Yahweh 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'" (1 Samuel 8:1-7).

No nation can render so noble a testimony to the integrity and public spirit of its ruler as when they call upon him to lay down his own power for the public good and to organize the new government and the choice of the ruler who is to supersede him. This was what the elders of Israel did when they appeared before Samuel one day at Ramah and requested him to establish a regal government. It does not appear to us that the solemnity of this great circumstance has been adequately apprehended.

The demand was not the outcry of an ignorant and deluded rabble but the grave and deliberate application of the *elders* of Israel--of those whose years or high standing in the nation gave to it the utmost weight and importance. It was not made from mere impulse of the moment but was the result of previous deliberation and conference; for the elders traveled to Ramah *for the purpose* of proposing the matter to the prophet. Beyond all doubt they had met together and considered the matter well before they took a step so decided.

It seems to us that the subject was set forth with considerable respect for, and delicacy to, Samuel. The elders were careful to show that their movement arose from no discontent with him. But they intimated that he was now advancing in years and his sons evinced no disposition to tread in his steps--implying by this that had it been otherwise they would have been content to let matters take their natural course and see Samuel's power consolidated in the hands of his sons and inherited by them. But since this was not the case, they were anxious to avert the evils likely to ensue upon his demise by having the secular government established on a permanent basis during his lifetime and under the sanction of his authority.

It is true that they went so far as to limit his action in this great matter by declaring the form of government they wanted. They must "have a king to rule them like the nations." It is far from unlikely that this preference for a regal government was suggested by circumstances with which we are unacquainted. It is possible that there were already signs of movement against Israel among the Philistines on the west and the Ammonites on the east, which suggested that they would soon be called upon to engage in a severe military contest without having anyone before the public qualified by his position or prowess to take the command of their armies and lead them to battle. Samuel himself, besides being advanced in years, was a man of peaceful pursuits; and his sons had forfeited, or had not won, the respect and confidence of the people. In addition, the Levites were scarcely the class of persons to be looked to for the performance of such duties.

We do not indeed lay too much stress on this sort of disqualification, for in those days there was no military profession, and almost every man was more or less qualified to wield the sword and the spear. But still, since the results of military conflicts were often determined by the prowess and experience of individuals, it was a natural subject of anxiety that the people of Israel saw no one with preeminent claims, from either fitness or station, to be their leader in the conflicts that seemed to be at hand. They were then led to envy the condition of the neighboring nations, each of which had a king who relieved his subjects from all anxiety in this matter. The king's chief office, naturally, was to be the leader in war; and from the necessities of his position he was trained from his youth up in all martial exercises. To him belonged the consideration and decision of all matters of peace and war, and his people were spared the trouble of deliberation and decision. They had nothing to do but obey his orders and follow him to battle.

It may also appear that the Israelites craved to have an earthly sovereign who would be surrounded with the usual attributes of power and state, and who would thus represent to the eyes of those around them the power and dignity of the nation. The eastern mind is thoroughly regal. To be without a sovereign is scarcely an intelligible state of affairs to an oriental. Thus the Israelites must have felt that the absence of a king gave them an appearance of inferiority in the eyes of their neighbors, who were incapable of understanding or appreciating the special and glorious privileges of Israel's present position under a Divine rule. The lack of a royal head of state must often have been cast in their teeth by their neighbors as a kind of stigma; and in time Israel would come to regard it as such themselves.. Even good men, able to appreciate the advantages of existing institutions, would eventually become weary of a peculiarity which the nations would persist in regarding as discreditable.

This principle does not lack historical confirmation. We remember having read some years ago in Harris's Collection of Travels, that when the English and Dutch were competing for power and influence in the East, the English, in order to damage their rivals, zealously circulated the dangerous secret that the Dutch *had no king*. The oriental mind was astonished and perplexed by a condition so utterly beyond the scope of its experience and comprehension. The Dutch, alarmed at the effect this slur might have upon their respectability, stoutly repelled the charge

as an infamous lie, and for the time being raised their current chief magistrate to that high rank.

The elders of Israel may also have taken into consideration that Moses had contemplated the probability that a regal government might eventually be adopted, having even laid down certain rules involving principles by which the conduct of their future king was to be guided (Deut. 17:14-20). They may have concluded this was the time that the wise and far-seeing lawgiver had contemplated.

These reasons were not satisfactory to Samuel, and he himself personally was affronted by what he could not but view as a requisition to abdicate the authority that he had so long and efficiently exercised. But hurt and displeased as he was under this keen sense of a nation's ingratitude, he is not recorded as having expressed any opinion until he felt authorized from the Lord to do so. His resource was that which has been the resource of the servants of God in all ages: "Samuel prayed to the Lord."

The answer to this prayer was not delayed. Samuel was told to act as the people desired, but to do so under a strong and decided protest that in this they had forsaken the wiser and happier course. They would involve themselves in greater troubles than those from which they sought to be freed. Samuel thought they had rejected him, but the Divine Voice directed him to a broader view of the question: "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that *I* should not reign over them."

It may be suspected that the Israelites had grown weary of a system of government that made their welfare entirely dependent upon their right conduct, hoping perhaps that a permanent government under a king would relieve them from some of their distinct responsibility to an infallible authority against whom they had no right to murmur. But since the Lord did not mean to abandon the Israelites to their own devices or allow his great goals for them to be frustrated, it became important that the same principle of national responsibility to him should be preserved under any form to which the government might be altered.