

434 Obedience and Difference

In I Samuel Chapter 8.4-5 we read of the elders of Israel coming to Samuel at Ramah with a blunt message: “Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations” (KJV). Here was a reckoning, first for Samuel as a father being confronted over his wayward sons (8.1-3), and second for the people of Israel themselves who wanted, in having a king, to be like all the other nations.

But this request was in flat contradiction of the Lord’s covenant with them: His chosen people were bound to be different, inevitably and unavoidably - “a peculiar treasure, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, a peculiar people” (egs., Exodus 19.5-6 / Deuteronomy 14.2; 26.18-19). In wanting a king, the Lord told Samuel in response to his prayers, “Hearken unto the voice of the people ... for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them” (8.6-7); then, “Hearken, protest solemnly” (v.9); and finally, after Samuel’s God-uttered warnings were refused, “Hearken ... make them a king” (vv.19-22). So the scene was set, and by the Lord’s allowance Saul was duly appointed king amidst great rejoicing (10.1,24-25; 11.14-15).

The Lord was displeased but after His clear warnings He granted their request: this divine characteristic, of His allowing wrongness to be done when He knows, and has warned of, the consequences, is well worth our pondering elsewhere within His Word - beginning with Genesis Chapter 3.

Then it was Samuel’s turn to be blunt (12.13ff): IF under this new king the people would fear the Lord, serve Him and obey Him, then they and the king would still continue following the Lord their God (v.14); but if not, then “shall the hand of the Lord be against you, as [it was] against your fathers” (v.15). Samuel’s words were vividly confirmed by the Lord sending thunder and rain in response to Samuel’s request, and the people certainly “got the message” – “we have added unto all our sins [this] evil, to ask us a king” (vv.16-19).

And then what words of grace! – “Fear not” (v.20). Yes, they had done wickedly, but the Lord would not forsake them, despite their sinful request, for one very simple reason - “for his great name’s sake” (v.22a). They had only been granted their special covenant status - “because it hath pleased the Lord to make you his people” (v.22b). For good

measure Samuel would continue to pray for them and to teach them “the good and the right way” (v.23).

We learn afresh here so much about the Lord’s nature and character: of His sovereignty, and of His grace, patience and forgiveness, all of which we see today in Christ under the New Covenant of grace and faith. The Lord God does not change – we do; and He waits patiently for us to come to our senses under the promptings of His Holy Spirit, to return to Him in confession and repentance, and then to live once more in holy fear, loving obedience and practical service.

These truths about Almighty God, who is now fully revealed to us all as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are applicable wherever we look: to Israel and the Jews, of then, now and yet to come; to the Christian Church in these challenging times, when the desire for acceptability can lead to downplaying “the offence of the cross” (Galatians 5.11); to nations and their leaders (monarchs, presidents and ... Prime Ministers); and to all families and individuals.

So in our own Christian lives our goal is not to be different from “the ways of the world” for difference’s sake. Like the children of Israel under the Old Covenant, we are called instead and above all to be faithful and obedient to the Lord and His Word, and as we do that we will inevitably differ from the lives of those around us in terms of beliefs and behaviour (egs., John 17.14-16 / Romans 12.1-2 / Titus 2.11-14 / Hebrews 13.13-16 / I Peter 2.9-12). Those differences in turn render us as “visual aids” of how life is to be lived under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and for the glory of Almighty God our heavenly Father (egs., Matthew 5.3-16; 6.33 / II Corinthians 5.17-21).

The children of Israel disobeyed God in rejecting difference and demanding a king. After clear warnings He finally agreed, and in His forgiving mercy He told them through Samuel to “fear not”, to “turn not aside”, and to serve Him still “with all their heart” (from I Samuel 12.20). God the Father says just the same to us today in Christ. First and always is to come our faithful obedience, the “abiding in Christ” (John 15.4ff); and then the inevitable lifestyle differences arising from that obedience play their part in witnessing, praise God, to the Lord Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, ascended and glorified - and soon to come for His own.

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