

NOTES AND QUESTIONS ON THE BOOK OF I SAMUEL FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY PART ONE - CHAPTERS 1-6

THE WRITER

The author of every book in the Bible is God.(II Tim.3:16) It therefore does not matter very much who wrote I Samuel. Clearly it could only partly have been written by Samuel himself because his death is recorded in chapter 25. If Samuel wrote the first part it is quite likely that Nathan or Gad finished the book.(I Chron.29:29) According to Jewish tradition, Samuel was the writer of the books of Judges and Ruth. Samuel occupies a unique place in the Old Testament. He was the last of the judges who taught the people of Israel how to apply the law of Moses to everyday life,(Acts 13:20) and the first of the prophets who were God's mouthpieces concerning Jesus.(Acts 3:24) He was a great example of faith.(Heb.11:32) He was remembered in the Old Testament as a man on speaking terms with God,(Ps.99:6) and an inspiration to God's people.(Jer.15:1)

THE THEME of the book is Jesus Christ.(Lk.24:27,44) The message centres around 3 fascinating characters, Samuel, Saul and David. Again and again in the New Testament Jesus is described as the son of David, so obviously in this book it is David who in some aspects of his life is a picture of the Lord Jesus. As John the Baptist prepared the way for the coming of Jesus so Samuel was sent to prepare the way for the coming of David. There are obvious similarities in their birth and calling. Saul is all that is impressive from a human point of view and could well be a picture of our human nature, 'the flesh', which wants to be king instead of Jesus in our lives.

CHAPTER ONE introduces us to the family of Samuel. Elkanah was a Levite,(I Chron.6:16-23) though living among the people of Ephraim, and so his son would be qualified to be a priest. His name means "God is possessing" a reminder that everything created belongs to God. He made a sad mistake in ignoring God's plan for marriage in Gen.3:24 and marrying two women, one of whom he loved and the other produced his children. God works despite our mistakes. Hannah means "grace". God gives, not because we are deserving but because of who He is. His gift is what Elkanah and Hannah desired more than anything else, a son. Samuel means "heard of God". God listens regardless of who we are and the mistakes we make. The son God gave belonged to God so his mother gave him back, a good attitude for any parent. His life as a trainee priest and prophet under Eli's care began with sacrifice, always in the Old Testament a picture of the cross where Jesus died in our place. Our service begins at the cross.

CHAPTER TWO begins with Hannah's prayer in which she delights in who God is, a foreshadowing of Mary's prayer of availability to God in Luke 1. The rest of the chapter describes Samuel's early life in Eli's charge and the continuing role of his parents in his early life. Hannah goes on to have 5 more children, a lovely reminder that we can never out-give God. Samuel's development is very much like that of the Lord Jesus as he grows physically, spiritually and socially.(Lk.2:52) By contrast the family of Eli have no interest in a real relationship with God, and make a mockery of worship. Eli tries to correct them but weakly allows his sons to continue in spiritual leadership when God has no place in their lives, a mistake Christian parents and leaders have made over and over ever since. The Lord sends a special messenger to Eli to warn him how his inaction will destroy his own ministry as well as his family. At the same time He lets him into the secret concerning the family of David, from whom will come the Anointed One, the Christ.

CHAPTER THREE tells of Samuel's call to begin his ministry. It is a lovely example of how God calls men and women into His service despite the weak leaders who were supposed to train them. The word of the Lord was rare in those days, presumably because no-one was listening. Young Samuel was one exception. God sees the heart, not the age or qualifications. There is a humour in the situation that has God calling again and again and Samuel assuming that it is Eli. Finally Eli realises, God actually does speak to men these days although it was obviously a long time since God had been able to say anything to him. Samuel's very first message from God will be the hardest sermon he ever has to preach. His task is to tell Eli the tough truth about the effect of his failure to manage his own household. Reluctantly he passes the message on exactly as he is told, and so learns the secret of being an effective preacher. We need to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. We are not to edit or embroider God's message. So Samuel's powerful ministry begins.

CHAPTER FOUR gives an indication of how far a real understanding of God's word has fallen at the time Samuel's ministry is getting under way. Faced with a major threat to their lives in the shape of the Philistines, the leaders of Israel assume that the secret of success and of God's blessing will be to carry the ark of the covenant into battle with them. The ark contained the 10 commandments given to Moses, in effect their Bible. Superstitiously they assume that simply carrying a 'Bible' around at difficult times will fix the problem. It does not and they are defeated. News of the defeat and the death of his sons who are presumably the priests carrying the ark, reaches poor Eli and causes his death and that of his daughter-in-law in childbirth.

CHAPTER FIVE reminds us of the power of the word of God. The Philistines place the ark of God next to their god, Dagon, in a heathen temple. Next morning Dagon has fallen flat on his face. No other religion or philosophy can stand beside the Bible when they are compared. The following night the same thing happens again and this time Dagon's head falls off and so do his arms. He did not make sense and he did not work! Nothing but the God of the Bible does make sense of the world we live in. The very presence of the ark causes the Philistines great discomfort. Often the heathen are more discerning than those who profess to be Christians.

CHAPTER SIX shows the Philistines in a desperate rush to get rid of the 'Bible' which is really convicting them. They try to buy God off with golden images of their discomfort, knowing nothing of the real means of forgiveness. God demonstrates His power over His creation by causing a cow to desert her calf to carry the ark back to where it rightly belonged. The Philistines are deeply impressed and go away to think about whether they have the wrong god. The Israelites on the other hand have still not understood the awesome holiness of God and take the return of the ark lightly. How much do we value and understand the amazing book we have?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR FURTHER STUDY

1. Why did God use 2 adulterers to bring His prophet, Samuel, into the world? What other examples of the same situation can you think of in the rest of the Bible? What can we learn from this story about our own failure and how God will deal with us? How might this change our response to failure in our Christian brothers and sisters?(chap.1)
2. What similarities are there between Hannah's prayer, and Mary's in Luke 1? What mistakes did Eli make as a father? How do we do the same? Why did God entrust Samuel's upbringing to such a weak foster father?(chap.2)
3. Why does God not seem to have much to say in some periods of times and countries? What can we do to change that situation? Why was this the hardest sermon Samuel ever had to deliver?(chap.3)
4. Why were Israel repeatedly defeated even when they took the Ark with them? What can we learn from their example? What bad news upset Eli most and why?(chap.4)
5. What can we learn from the story of Dagon and the Ark about how to confront false teaching today? How in practice should we apply this lesson?(chap.5)
6. How was the Philistines' reaction to the Ark similar to unbelievers' reaction to the Bible today? Why did God deal so severely with those who looked inside the Ark? What warning is there in this for us?(chap.6)