

## 1 Samuel 8:1-20

8 When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. <sup>2</sup>The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beer-sheba. <sup>3</sup>Yet his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice.

4 Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, <sup>5</sup>and said to him, 'You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.' <sup>6</sup>But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, 'Give us a king to govern us.' Samuel prayed to the Lord, <sup>7</sup>and the Lord said to Samuel, 'Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. <sup>8</sup>Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. <sup>9</sup>Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.'

10 So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. <sup>11</sup>He said, 'These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; <sup>12</sup>and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. <sup>13</sup>He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. <sup>14</sup>He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. <sup>15</sup>He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. <sup>16</sup>He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. <sup>17</sup>He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. <sup>18</sup>And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.'

19 But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, 'No! but we are determined to have a king over us, <sup>20</sup>so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.'

## Matthew 2:1-8

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

## Follow Directions

### 1. Lawyers, Guns, and Money

There was a popular song back in the 1978 by Warren Zevon titled "Lawyers, Guns, and Money." Warren had a knack for writing humorous lyrics. In this song Warren speaks as a bit of reckless man-of-

the-world. In one verse he sings, “I was gambling in Havana; I took a little risk. Send lawyers, guns, and money; Dad, get me out of this.” Now I’ve never gambled in Havana, but there have been times I’ve given my father a call (and speaking as a father there have been times when I’ve *received* that call from a son who has at times been in need of not-so-much lawyers and guns but most definitely money. I appreciated a dad who could come to my aid when I had messed up, and I think my son appreciates me for the same reason.

It’s nice to be “bailed out” whether literally or figuratively. It’s nice to have someone either rich or influential to come to your aid when you take that wrong turn at Albuquerque or end up behind the wrong kind of bars, but sometimes it’s better for us not to be bailed out; sometimes it’s better that no one sends us lawyers, guns or money, because if we’re always bailed out, we fail to learn and fail to grow. Today I want to conclude our series on “the journey” by pointing out that God sometimes allows us to walk down wrong paths and does NOT immediately respond when we cry out to him so that we learn from our mistakes, get back on the right path, and help others from going astray. And we should be thankful that God puts “angels” or messengers in our path to warn us and redirect us, because without such messengers we would all be in a world of hurting.

Today I’ll use the scripture passages to illustrate 3 obstacles to following God’s instructions which help explain why we can avoid them for so long. My prayer is that you will recognize where these obstacles appear in your life and that you would recognize how important it is to stick with God’s directions, walking on the path that he wants you to walk along, so that you can help others along the same path.

To begin though, there is one common problem that will lead anyone to stray: separation from God’s voice, a voice that we can only hear when we pray, when we study scripture, and when we hear it from God’s ambassadors.

## 2. It Sounds Good on Paper

Going down the wrong path is quite an easy thing to do, and it begins when we distance ourselves from the word of God. In the story of the fall in the Garden of Eden we find one human being listening to a talking serpent who’s telling her that if she just bites that apple that her eyes will be opened, that she’ll be like God knowing good and evil, and all that sounds great, doesn’t it. Who wouldn’t want to have their eyes opened? Who wouldn’t want to be like God? Of course the catch in knowing good and evil is that you have to experience evil to really know it, and that’s not such a good thing, but that’s the part that the human doesn’t hear. Break God’s rules and you know evil, and suddenly you feel more separated from God.

## 3. Misery Loves Company

Of course you don’t have to go it alone; all the woman had to do was offer a bite to the man, and they were walking down the road to ruin together. In today’s Old Testament lesson we find the whole nation of Israel taking the wrong path together – and they too have good reason to pick the wrong path; the current leaders are corrupt and other nations who have kings seem to be much stronger than Israel. Of course the part that they don’t want think about is this; if the judges, who have limited rule over Israel, are corrupted and causing the people to suffer, won’t a king, who has more power and more authority, cause the people to suffer even more? Here we see another consequence of sin – the tendency to cast blame on others, and it was there in the Garden of Eden as the man blames the woman, and the woman blames the serpent, but now it’s the nation of Israel blaming its problems on

its current leaders and those darn foreigners who are attacking her borders. They think a king is going to fix everything, and God, through his prophet Samuel, tells them that a king is only going to make things worse. Of course God is right; within three generations the people are going to be exhausted by all the taxes and forced labor, and the country will have its own civil war.

#### 4. God lets us learn the hard way.

And what is noteworthy is that God allows the people to have their way, as wrong as their way is. Samuel is the only person who seems to have a clue as to the catastrophe that will follow, and he is none too pleased by the people's obstinance, and he tells the people what will happen, but the people head down that path anyway. We may think that it's wrong for God to allow the people to head down this road to ruin, but sometimes that's the only way they learn their lesson. It's not that God doesn't give them a chance; Samuel lays it all out for them. It's just that the people don't want to hear it. When people decide not to listen to God, God permits them to ignore him. As the saying goes, "Sometimes we have to learn things the hard way."

#### 5. Some folks never learn

The good news for Israel was that there would be redemption; other prophets would rise and the people would listen to them, change their ways, and get on the right path. The real tragedy occurs when we become completely deaf to God's words, when we close our ears entirely to God. This is what happens in our Gospel passage, although it's not explicitly stated. The King Herod mentioned here is King Herod the Great, who has been described as "a madman who murdered his own family and a great many rabbis."<sup>i</sup> How would you like to have that legacy? Though his actions were horrible, I want to focus on his madness, because that's the trajectory of anyone who has absolute power; madness. Not everyone with absolute power gets there – to madness – but we can think of a good many people who *have*. Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Eun, Idi Amin, Saddam Husain and sons to name a few. When, like King Herod, you have absolute power, there is no one who will dare cross you. And when no one will cross you, you feel pretty much free to do whatever you want to do, to take anything you want from anyone you want whenever you want, which sounds like a great thing, right? It's every child's dream! But it's a path that leads if not to hell at least to madness, to a mind and a soul absent of God, to a mind and soul that imagines oneself as God, but by anyone's assessment, as an evil god.

#### 6. Thank God for Godly Critics

Having prayerful people rooted in God's word is essential for our faith journey in order to get us on the right path and to keep us there. In order to have this we have to have prayerful people rooted in God's word. Without these two essential elements, prayer and familiarity with God's word, we are in danger of straying off course, of taking the wrong path. Anyone who has been to one of my Bible studies knows that I look hard at the Bible, that I don't take it lightly. I take it so seriously that I criticize it often. Anyone who knows the church schedules knows that I start each day in fervent prayer, usually at 6 a.m. Am I'm not saying this to boast, but it's a challenge and a warning. I'm far from perfect, and I know my own propensity to go down the wrong path. Would you be able to correct me if I went astray? Are you familiar enough with God's love and God's will that you would be able to counsel me or any other pastor who stands here on Sunday? Because I could start preaching things that you might like to hear, and that might serve to unite most of us against some outside enemy, and we could all fall in line to fight this outside foe, but would someone have the spiritual grounding and the courage to speak out against the majority? We have to challenge ourselves, as we challenge one another, to

discern the path of this Christ child, and to keep one another on that path. The best way we can pay homage to Jesus is by truly making him Lord of our lives, and by leading others to do the same.

---

<sup>i</sup> Spino, Ken (Rabbi) (2010). "History Crash Course #31: Herod the Great (online)". [Crash Course in Jewish History](#). Targum Press. [ISBN 978-1-5687-1532-2](#). Retrieved 7 May 2013.