

The Peter Principle

Some years ago, Laurence J. Peter developed a management concept eponymously named “The Peter Principle.” He observed “that people in a hierarchy tend to rise to ‘a level of respective incompetence.’” In other words, a person that might make a good low-level manager will only rise to the point of his/her inability to manage effectively. Solomon saw this millennia ago: “Luxury is not fitting for a fool, much less for a servant to rule over princes” (Proverbs 19:10).

This principle is, of course, generic as there are exceptions to every rule. David, a lowly shepherd boy and the “runt of the litter,” arose to be the pinnacle of Israel’s kings. Saul, however, was an example of the rule.

Saul began very humbly. When approached with the prospect of becoming King, “*Saul answered and said, ‘Am I not a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel, and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? Why then do you speak like this to me?’*” (1 Samuel 9:1). He even hid at his coronation (1 Samuel 10:21-22). Yet, God elevated him to the level of prophet (1 Samuel 10:11) and gave him great military victories (1 Samuel 11:6ff). So, what went wrong?

First, he forgot Who had put him where he was. You “*can do all things through Christ who strengthens*” you (Philippians 4:13) but without Him, “*you can do nothing*” (John 15:5). Consulting your own wisdom instead of submitting to God is the death knell of many leaders. Ignoring even the simplest instructions, no matter how difficult they may seem (1 Samuel 15:3), in favor of your “better idea” is tantamount to rejecting God (1 Samuel 15:23); and you cannot reject God with impunity (1 Samuel 15:26; comp. John 12:48).

Second, he caved to the popular vote. Leaders are especially susceptible to compromise for the sake of “peace” (Jeremiah 6:14). Popularity comes easier if my message is pure sugar (Isaiah 30:10), and I certainly don’t enjoy dishing out Brussels sprouts (Philippians 3:18). However, the truth is the truth no matter how it’s delivered, and the fact that the medicine tastes bad doesn’t hinder its benefit. Discipline can be “not-fun” but, on occasion, it’s wholly appropriate (Hebrews 12:8), even when it’s a group exercise (cf. Acts 17:22ff).

Saul catered to the people and left God; so, God left him.