

(10) THE ANCIENT STORY: 1 SAMUEL 16:1-13

- Focus Idea:** As God's people transition from spiritual overseers to conventional kings, God reveals that the condition of the heart is God's most important leadership criteria.
- The Context:** 1 Samuel is one of the Old Testament's books of history. It describes the end of the *Period of the Judges* and the outset of the *Era of the Kings*. After the Israelites crossed over the Jordan River and settled in the land of Canaan, they squandered much of the unity that had bound them together during their wilderness wanderings. To deliver the vulnerable people, God raised up *judges*. While their specific roles varied, judges typically functioned as local warlords or wise chieftains who rallied the people against their Canaanite and Philistine enemies. While these judges had intervals of success, the Israelites persisted in a long moral and political decline. Eventually, the people had seen enough of the short-term fixes and demanded an crowned monarch to protect and lead the nation. 1 Samuel focuses on the first two kings – Saul, a promising leader who ultimately fell from God's favor – and David, a shepherd-boy turned national hero.
- The Characters:** Samuel, the last of the judges, is the primary carrier of action in this story. Called into service at a young age, Samuel grew into a strong leader in Israel. He was God's mouthpiece when God wished to speak to the people and became the kingmaker when the people pushed for a monarch "like the other nations had." When Saul failed in his responsibilities, Samuel looked for a new king at the home of Jesse, an unremarkable herdsman from Bethlehem. Several of his sons presented themselves, but in the end it was the youngest boy, David, who was chosen and anointed to become Saul's successor.
- The Core:** From their earliest days, the nation of Israel had recognized that God was their ultimate ruler. At God's direction, people like Moses and Joshua and Deborah and Gideon had taken turns as the primary decision-makers for the people.

When the people became weary of wondering who would be their leader next (and when that leader would arise), they pressured Samuel to appoint a sovereign king over the nation. Reluctantly (see chapters 8-12), Samuel appointed Saul – an outwardly imposing man (10:23) whose spiritual weakness ultimately led to his demise.

To find his replacement, God sent Samuel to the farm of Jesse of Bethlehem. One of his eight sons would be the next king of Israel. The eldest son, Eliab, passed the look test. But God had not chosen him, and 16:7 offers a window into why. God says: *Do not consider his appearance or his height (a clear jab at Saul)...people look at outward appearances, but the Lord looks at the heart.*

None of the first seven sons possessed the heart that God was looking for. Only when the youngest ran home from the fields did Samuel lay eyes on the one God had chosen. He was a handsome boy, but his ruddy features were not what drew God's attention. This was David, a man known for generations to come as "a king after God's own heart." (13:14; Acts 13:22)

Though he did not reign perfectly, David became the gold-standard against which future kings would be measured. In time, God's people came to recognize that physical features, financial resources, and military prowess were ultimately of little value if the spirit of the king was selfish or heartless. Only those whose love for the people aligned with God's could rightly represent him.