

1 Samuel

by Joshua Danker-Dake

All scripture taken from the New International Version (NIV, 2011)

Josh Danker-Dake has provided us with a great series of lessons on 1 Samuel. As Josh notes in his introduction, 1 Samuel focuses on three crucial characters in the Old Testament: Samuel, Saul, and David. This also marks a pivotal transition in the Old Testament to the era of Israel having a King. There is much that we can learn from the lives of all three of these characters and the book as a whole. The book has thirty-one chapters, so each lesson includes both a big picture overview of multiple chapters and opportunities to dig into specific parts of the story.

These lessons are written with discussion in mind. Each lesson includes discussion questions that engage directly with the lesson, and Josh provides a recap to help people catch up in the story each week. As with most of our lessons, there is a lot of material to go through each week. We trust you to make each lesson your own and to be led by the Spirit to teach each class what they need for each week.

Here is the overview of the lessons in 1 Samuel.

Lesson 1: Samuel and the Sons of Eli: 1 Samuel 1–3

Lesson 2: War with the Philistines: 1 Samuel 4-7

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Lesson 4: The Downfall of Saul: 1 Samuel 13-15

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Lesson 1
Samuel and the Sons of Eli
1 Samuel 1–3

Introduction

As 1 Samuel begins, it has been nearly 400 years since Joshua's conquest of the Promised Land. After his farewell address to the nation of Israel, at the covenant renewal ceremony, Joshua famously said, "Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:14–15).

Choose to serve the Lord. This is the essence of Joshua's message. It is a timeless command, never irrelevant, one that is absolutely vital not only through the Old Testament and the Bible but also to the present day. Yet it is also one that the nation of Israel had a great deal of trouble following.

Read: Judges 2:10–16

After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the Lord's anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. In his anger against Israel the Lord gave them into the hands of raiders who plundered them. He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the Lord was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.

Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders.

After the faithful generation that came out of the wilderness and conquered the Promised Land through faithful obedience came a generation that did not know

the Lord. Instead, they served foreign gods, often for political (alliances) and economic (trade with other nations) reasons. God punished them via foreign attackers, who plundered them until they repented, at which point God sent judges to deliver them. Yet this was not an isolated incident: the idolatry–defeat–repentance–deliverance cycle would continue for almost 400 years. Choosing to serve the Lord is a perpetual challenge.

The book of Judges concludes thusly: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (Judges 21:25). In 1 Samuel, that will finally change.

Question: Why did Israel not have a king? What did it signify?

Not having a king or individual in whom power was consolidated was a rarity in the ancient world. This is one of the many ways in which God had set Israel apart, making them distinctly different from the nations around them. And he had a good reason for doing so: God himself was to serve as their king. But 1 Samuel chronicles how the people of Israel seek to exchange the kingship of God for that of a man.

1 Samuel centers on three main characters: Samuel, Saul, and David. It is a book of sharp contrasts, and the distinctions are abundantly clear throughout between those who serve the Lord and those who do not.

The Birth of Samuel (1 Samuel 1)

The story begins with a man named Elkanah, who has two wives. While the Old Testament never explicitly condemns polygamy, whenever mentioned, the practice seems to cause nothing but problems (see also Sarah and Hagar, Leah and Rachel).

Much like the story of Leah and Rachel, one of Elkanah’s wives, Peninnah, has children, while the other, Hannah, has none. A rivalry develops: in this society, children, specifically male children, conferred social status and gave a woman worth. Elkanah loves Hannah more, and thus the rivalry is exacerbated, with Peninnah “provoking” Hannah (v. 6).

Hannah goes to the temple at Shiloh, which was the center of worship before Solomon’s temple was built, makes a vow to the Lord: “Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant’s misery and remember me, and not forget your

servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head” (v. 11).

This passage also introduces us to Eli, the high priest in charge of the temple and the current judge of Israel (4:18). Overall, he is presented as perhaps somewhat bumbling, but certainly good-hearted and well-intentioned.

Hannah is in the temple, praying “in her heart” (v. 13)—her lips are moving but she is not speaking audibly. Eli believes her to be drunk, and he confronts her. But he allows her to explain her situation to him. He is sympathetic, and he blesses her, asking God to grant her request.

Hannah goes home and eventually gives birth to Samuel—a name meaning “God has heard.” In keeping with her vow, when he is weaned, she takes him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh and places him in the care of Eli.

Eli’s Sons (1 Samuel 2)

Eli has two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, and we are told straight away that they are wicked men who have “no regard for the Lord” (v. 12). Although they are priests themselves, they are corrupt.

Read: 1 Samuel 2:13–17

Now it was the practice of the priests that, whenever any of the people offered a sacrifice, the priest’s servant would come with a three-pronged fork in his hand while the meat was being boiled and would plunge the fork into the pan or kettle or caldron or pot. Whatever the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is how they treated all the Israelites who came to Shiloh. But even before the fat was burned, the priest’s servant would come and say to the person who was sacrificing, “Give the priest some meat to roast; he won’t accept boiled meat from you, but only raw.”

If the person said to him, “Let the fat be burned first, and then take whatever you want,” the servant would answer, “No, hand it over now; if you don’t, I’ll take it by force.”

This sin of the young men was very great in the Lord’s sight, for they were treating the Lord’s offering with contempt.

Question: What exactly is the problem here?

Under the law (Exodus 29:27, Leviticus 7:31-32), portions of the sacrificed animal are given to the priests to support them. Eli's sons are not satisfied with these portions—they are seizing by force other portions that are to be offered to the Lord.

Things get even worse with Eli's sons: we are told that they are also sleeping with the women who serve the Lord at the entrance to the tent of meeting—and we may presume that this too is by force. Eli hears of what his sons are doing and rebukes them. But they are completely unrepentant—"for it was the Lord's will to put them to death" (v. 25).

Meanwhile, Samuel, still a child, is "ministering before the Lord" (18). Every year, his parents visit him, and his mother brings him a little robe she's made. God blesses their family, and Hannah has three more sons and two daughters. Samuel grows "in stature and in favor with the Lord and with people" (v. 26).

Note how sharp the contrast is here. Samuel, who is living with Eli, essentially as a son, is "growing up in the presence of the Lord" (v. 21); meanwhile, Eli's biological sons are absolutely terrible human beings. Samuel is growing in favor with the Lord, but God has decided to put Eli's sons to death.

Question: What is the fundamental difference between Samuel and Eli's sons?

At a very basic level, Samuel wants to serve the Lord; Hophni and Phinehas do not, and they act accordingly in all they do. This was a theme in Judges and it will continue to be a theme not only throughout 1 Samuel but also across the entire Old Testament.

Later, a man of God comes to Eli with a prophecy of doom (2:27–36), rebuking Eli for his out-of-control sons. The two will die on the same day, he says, and God will raise up in their place a faithful priest who will do the will of God (this will be Samuel, as it turns out).

The Call of Samuel (1 Samuel 3)

As this story begins, we are told, "In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions" (v. 1). This makes what follows even more significant.

Read: 1 Samuel 3:2–10

One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called Samuel.

Samuel answered, "Here I am." And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

Again the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

"My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

A third time the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"

Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

A lot of us know this story of the call of Samuel—how he got up and went to Eli and went back to lie down, and went back and forth—and we think of it as a wonderful little story. But most of us don't realize the devastating prophecy against Eli's family that God gave to this child:

"See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end. For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God, and he failed to restrain them. Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, 'The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering'" (vv. 11–14).

This is a big message to give to a little boy. Samuel is understandably reluctant to share it with Eli, and he waits until morning. But Eli seems to have an idea of what is coming, and his response to this message of doom is interesting: "He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes" (v. 18). There is no repentance, no call to action here—perhaps Eli knows that it is too late for these things. There is submission to God in his response, yes, but also resignation and defeat. The horse is out of the barn. Eli is old and going blind; as we saw in chapter 2, there is little he can do about it at this point. He knows that his sons are out of control,

and he knows that he is to a great extent responsible, both as their father and as Israel's high priest. His acceptance of God's judgment suggests that he owns this responsibility.

This chapter ends with another contrast: "The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord. The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word" (vv. 19–21).

Recall that at the beginning of the chapter, we are told that the word of the Lord is rare; yet God is revealing his word to Samuel, apparently on a regular basis. While Eli's house has been doomed to destruction, Samuel becomes renowned as a prophet of the Lord, not only in Shiloh but throughout the nation of Israel.

Discussion

Question: Why does Israel have such a hard time serving the Lord?

Question: Eli has the same problem with his sons that the settlers of the Promised Land had: They were faithful, but the next generation did not serve the Lord.

-Why does this happen?

-How do we prevent it from happening with our own children?

Question: What challenges and obstacles to serving the Lord do we face today?

Lesson 2
War with the Philistines
1 Samuel 4–7

Recap

Since Joshua's conquest of the Promised Land, Israel has been governed by judges. The current judge, Eli the high priest, is old and blind; his sons Hophni and Phinehas, who are priests, are unrepentantly wicked, and God has pronounced judgment against them. Meanwhile, Samuel, who was given by his mother to God and is now living with Eli in the house of the Lord, is growing in wisdom and stature and is establishing a reputation throughout the nation as a prophet of the Lord.

The Philistines Capture the Ark (1 Samuel 4)

Philistia was a nation comprising five city-states—Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath—that neighbored Israel on the west in what is modern-day Israel and Gaza. They are Israel's enemies in perpetuity—for hundreds of years—and there is frequently outright war between the two nations. It is therefore not surprising that this portion of the narrative opens simply with "Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines" (v. 1). No explanation is given, and none is needed—the hostilities are continual at this point, and will be so throughout all of 1 Samuel.

In the battle, Israel is soundly defeated. Back at camp, the Israelite's ask, "Why did the Lord bring defeat upon us today?" (v. 3). We can guess at the answer from Israel's history: from the days of Joshua hundreds of years into the past to the times of the kings hundreds of years in the future, God gives other nations victory over Israel to punish them for wickedness and unfaithfulness.

The Israelites decide to bring out the Ark of the Covenant and to take it into battle. The Ark is Israel's most significant religious artifact: it signifies the presence of God among the people. Taking it into battle means that Israel is bringing out the big guns, as it were. The Israelites believe that this will turn the tide of battle. So the Ark is brought to the battlefield, and Hophni and Phinehas are among those who come with it.

Question: Is bringing the Ark into battle a good idea? What is the problem with the Israelites' logic?

The priesthood of Israel is corrupt. Possibly the people have been unfaithful as well. There is only one correct solution to this problem: repentance. But as we have seen, Hophni and Phinehas are wantonly unrepentant. Israel treats the Ark as a magical item, a power to be harnessed; at no point in this conflict is the will of God ever taken into consideration.

In contrast, the Philistines, at least, have a proper respect for the God of Israel: "When they learned that the ark of the Lord had come into the camp, the Philistines were afraid. 'A god has come into the camp,' they said. 'Oh no! Nothing like this has happened before. We're doomed! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!'" (vv. 6–9).

The two armies battle again, and Israel suffers a catastrophic defeat. Thousands are killed, Hophni and Phinehas among them, as prophesied. Shockingly for Israel, the Ark is captured: God has either been defeated, or else he has abandoned Israel—or so it would seem.

Word comes to Eli, who is "sitting on his chair by the side of the road, watching, because his heart feared for the ark of God" (v. 13). No doubt he has the prophecies against his line in mind. He appears relatively unsurprised to hear that his sons are dead—he seems to have made peace with that eventuality in chapter 2—but when he hears that the Ark has been lost, he falls out of his chair in shock, breaks his neck, and dies. He has led Israel for forty years, and now this leadership ends ignominiously.

When Phinehas's pregnant wife hears all that has happened, she goes into premature labor and dies. Her final act is to name her son Ichabod, perfectly capturing the sentiment of the nation: "The glory has departed from Israel" (v. 21).

The Ark in Philistia (1 Samuel 5)

At this point, the narrative shifts to focus on the Philistines. While it certainly would not have been to the people of the time, in retrospect, this passage can read as a bit humorous.

The Philistines take the Ark to Ashdod, one of their five chief cities, and place it in the temple of their national god, Dagon, as a trophy—this is a public sign that Dagon has triumphed over the God of Israel.

The God of Israel, however, has other ideas. In the morning, the Philistines come into the temple and discover that the idol of Dagon has fallen over on its face in front of the Ark. They pick him up and put him back. The next day, however, not only has the idol of Dagon fallen over again—if the significance of this isn't obvious enough—his head and hands have broken off. The message is clear: Dagon has no power of the God of Israel.

God punishes the Philistines of Ashdod, bringing “devastation” on the people and afflicting them with tumors (some translations have “hemorrhoids”) (v. 6), plus a plague of rats (6:4).

The people of Ashdod realize that neither they nor Dagon are a match for the God of Israel. So they send the Ark to Gath, another of the Philistines' chief cities. When the same plagues and afflictions happen there, the people of Gath send the Ark to Ekron, and when it arrives, the people there say, quite understandably, “They have brought the ark of the god of Israel around to us to kill us and our people” (v. 10).

The Philistines had five chief cities, but the foolishness ends here after seven months, as the people of Ekron prevail upon the Philistine rulers to concede defeat and send the Ark back to Israel.

The Ark Is Returned to Israel (1 Samuel 6)

The Philistine priests and diviners seem to have a correct understanding of how to resolve the situation. They say, “If you return the ark of the god of Israel, do not send it back to him without a gift; by all means send a guilt offering to him. Then you will be healed, and you will know why his hand has not been lifted from you” (v. 3).

They make five gold tumors (or hemorrhoids) and five gold rats, in accordance with the nature of their suffering—one for each of the five chief cities of the

Philistines. They put these in a chest, which they load on a cart pulled by two cows, and turn it loose, trusting that God will get it back to Israel. But they take no chances: to be certain, the rulers of the Philistines follow the cart all the way back to the border of Israel.

The Ark arrives at the town of Beth Shemesh, where the Israelite farmers are harvesting their wheat. When they see the Ark, they rejoice greatly. They smash up the wooden cart and sacrifice the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord. Ascertaining that everything seems to be all right now, the rulers of the Philistines return home.

However, in keeping with the ongoing theme that the Israelites never seem to get it quite right when it comes to obeying the Lord, some of the farmers look into the Ark—clearly showing less respect for the artifact than the Philistines did—and God puts them to death. Thus, what should be a joyous occasion ends on a rather sour note.

Israel Commits to Serve the Lord (1 Samuel 7)

The Ark is taken to the town of Kiriath Jearim, where it stays for the next twenty years. During this time, trouble with the Philistines continues, and the Israelites “mourned and sought after the Lord” (v. 2). For a long time, the lesson had not yet been learned: the people had not committed to serve the Lord. But finally, showing genuine repentance, they get it right.

Samuel has become the judge, the leader of Israel. He tells the people, “If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines” (v. 3). The people obey. Samuel tells them, “Assemble all Israel at Mizpah, and I will intercede with the Lord for you” (v. 5). The people come and fast, confessing, “We have sinned against the Lord” (v. 6).

While Samuel is making sacrifices to the Lord, the Philistines mobilize to attack. The people are afraid, and they cry out to Samuel. Samuel appeals to the Lord on Israel’s behalf and, we are told, “The Lord answered him” (v. 9). “The Lord thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites. The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth Kar” (vv. 10–11).

There would have been no doubt whatsoever in anyone's mind at the time that these events were related. The people of Israel repent and confess their sins, committing themselves to serve the Lord, and God intervenes directly, not only saving Israel from the Philistines but giving them a decisive victory.

The tide has turned, and it will remain so for the rest of Samuel's time as the leader of Israel. We read, "The Philistines were subdued and they stopped invading Israel's territory. Throughout Samuel's lifetime, the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines. The towns from Ekron to Gath that the Philistines had captured from Israel were restored to Israel, and Israel delivered the neighboring territory from the hands of the Philistines" (vv. 13–14).

Discussion

Question: God punishes Israel using the Philistines, but he also punishes the Philistines for taking the Ark. What is he doing?

Question: Only after being defeated by the Philistines and losing the Ark do the Israelites repent and turn to the Lord.

-Why do we learn and come around only when things get sufficiently bad?

-How can we cultivate a God-centered attitude of repentance *before* disaster strikes?

Question: Why did the Israelites trust in the Ark rather than in the Lord and right living? How does that mindset develop?

Lesson 3
Saul Becomes King
1 Samuel 8–12

Recap

Israel has been at war with the Philistines for hundreds of years, with God often using the Philistines to punish Israel for its unfaithfulness. At last, under the leadership of Samuel, Israel repents and commits to serve the Lord, and God gives the nation victory over the Philistines.

Israel Asks for a King (1 Samuel 8)

Samuel has had a long and successful tenure as the judge of Israel, but now he has become old. He appoints his sons as judges to succeed him, but he has the same problem that his predecessor Eli had with his own sons: they are corrupt, accepting bribes and so perverting justice.

The elders of Israel are dissatisfied. They don't want Samuel to die and leave them in the hands of these people. They come to him and make a bold request: "You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have" (v. 5).

Samuel, understandably, takes this personally, and he prays to the Lord about it.

Read: 1 Samuel 8:6–9

But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. And the Lord told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights."

Question: How is Israel asking for a king to lead them rather than a judge a rejection of God?

“Warn them what a king will do,” God says, and Samuel gives them a warning: a fair and accurate warning:

Read: 1 Samuel 8:11–18

“This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.”

While this may sound grim, this is not a threat; this is simply what a king was like in those days. Yet the people insist.

“Give them a king,” God says (v. 22), and Samuel relents. Thus Israel trades its unique situation—having God as its king—to become like all the nations around them.

Samuel Anoints Saul (1 Samuel 9–10:8)

Here we are introduced to Saul. He is the son of “a man of standing” (9:1) and “as handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel, and he was a head taller than anyone else” (9:2). In all outward aspects, he is very much a kingly figure.

Saul’s father has lost some donkeys, and Saul is tasked with finding them. After a long, unsuccessful journey, Saul’s servant suggests that they go and ask Samuel to help them, as they are near his hometown. God instructs Samuel to anoint Saul king over Israel, and he does so, saying, “The Spirit of the Lord will come powerfully upon you, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a different person” (10:6).

Saul Becomes King (1 Samuel 10:9–27)

As Saul departs from Samuel, the prophecy is fulfilled. “God changed Saul’s heart” (v. 9), we read. When he arrives at Gibeah, he comes upon a procession of prophets. The Spirit of God comes upon him, and he joins in their prophesying; thus, the word of God spoken through Samuel is confirmed. When Saul returns home, however, he does not tell his family about what Samuel had said about the kingship—likely he still has doubts.

Samuel summons all Israel at Mizpah for the coronation, but this is not an entirely joyous event. He says to the people, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘I brought Israel up out of Egypt, and I delivered you from the power of Egypt and all the kingdoms that oppressed you.’ But you have now rejected your God, who saves you out of all your disasters and calamities. And you have said, ‘No, appoint a king over us.’ So now present yourselves before the Lord by your tribes and clans” (vv. 18–19).

Before the entire nation, Saul is chosen to be king by lot—but he is not to be found. Perhaps suffering from stage fright, he has hidden himself among the baggage. At last, he is brought out.

Read: 1 Samuel 10:24–27

Samuel said to all the people, “Do you see the man the Lord has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people.”

Then the people shouted, “Long live the king!”

Samuel explained to the people the rights and duties of kingship. He wrote them down on a scroll and deposited it before the Lord. Then Samuel dismissed the people to go to their own homes.

Saul also went to his home in Gibeah, accompanied by valiant men whose hearts God had touched. But some scoundrels said, “How can this fellow save us?” They despised him and brought him no gifts. But Saul kept silent.

Saul and the Ammonites (1 Samuel 11)

Soon after this not-entirely-smooth coronation, Saul is presented with his first kingly challenge. The Ammonites come up and besiege the city of Jabesh Gilead. The men of the city have no real hope of deliverance, as they say, “Make a treaty with us, and we will be subject to you” (v. 1). Nahash, the leader of the Ammonites, tells them that he is willing to make a treaty if they will allow him to gouge out the right eye of each of them to “bring disgrace on all Israel” (v. 2).

This gives the men of Jabesh pause, and they ask for seven days to send messengers throughout Israel; if no one comes to rescue them, then they will agree to these terms. Nahash magnanimously allows them to do so, likely guessing that no one will come and that he will be able to take the city without a battle. It is notable that these messengers are sent to appeal to the people of Israel rather than to Saul—clearly there is not a great deal of respect yet for this fledgling monarchy.

When Saul hears of it, he is just returning from his fields, with his oxen—apparently the life of a king is not yet all glamour and ease. The Spirit of God comes upon him powerfully, and he burns with anger. He cuts up a pair of his oxen and sends the pieces throughout Israel, proclaiming, “This is what will be done to the oxen of anyone who does not follow Saul and Samuel” (v. 7). His name might not carry much weight yet, but Samuel’s does, and Saul is not afraid to use it.

The terror of the Lord falls on all the people, and they rally to Saul, a mighty army. Immediately after this rather striking recruitment drive, Saul attacks the Ammonites and defeats them soundly. This is a tremendous victory: Saul’s popularity soars, and his place as king is now secure.

Read: 1 Samuel 11:12–15

The people then said to Samuel, “Who was it that asked, ‘Shall Saul reign over us?’ Turn these men over to us so that we may put them to death.”

But Saul said, “No one will be put to death today, for this day the Lord has rescued Israel.”

Then Samuel said to the people, “Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingship.” So all the people went to Gilgal and made Saul king in the presence of the Lord. There they sacrificed fellowship offerings before the Lord, and Saul and all the Israelites held a great celebration.

Things are going well for Saul on all fronts. The Spirit of God is with him. He has saved his people. He is gracious in victory. At this point, it looks very much as though this king business is going to work out all right after all, for everyone concerned.

Samuel’s Farewell Address (1 Samuel 12)

Samuel, now very old, addresses the people. He is, essentially, going into retirement. In his speech, he attests to his blameless personal character and reminds the people of everything that the Lord has done for them, from Moses all the way up to the present, how the Lord has saved them from every danger and enemy. But he has clearly not gotten over Israel's demand for a king.

Read: 1 Samuel 12:12–25

“But when you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites was moving against you, you said to me, ‘No, we want a king to rule over us’—even though the Lord your God was your king. Now here is the king you have chosen, the one you asked for; see, the Lord has set a king over you. If you fear the Lord and serve and obey him and do not rebel against his commands, and if both you and the king who reigns over you follow the Lord your God—good! But if you do not obey the Lord, and if you rebel against his commands, his hand will be against you, as it was against your ancestors.

“Now then, stand still and see this great thing the Lord is about to do before your eyes! Is it not wheat harvest now? I will call on the Lord to send thunder and rain. And you will realize what an evil thing you did in the eyes of the Lord when you asked for a king.”

Then Samuel called on the Lord, and that same day the Lord sent thunder and rain. So all the people stood in awe of the Lord and of Samuel.

The people all said to Samuel, “Pray to the Lord your God for your servants so that we will not die, for we have added to all our other sins the evil of asking for a king.”

“Do not be afraid,” Samuel replied. “You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart. Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless. For the sake of his great name the Lord will not reject his people, because the Lord was pleased to make you his own. As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right. But be sure to fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you. Yet if you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will perish.”

The people have erred—sinned—in asking for a king. Yet at the most basic level, their situation is not so different than it had been. The choice before them is the same as it has ever been and ever will be: to serve the Lord and be blessed, or to turn away from the Lord after their own pursuits and be rejected.

Discussion

Question: What was Israel's fundamental motivation for asking for a king? Samuel's sons were corrupt, but what did the people hope would be different about a king? How do their expectations compare to reality?

Question: Why does God agree to Israel's demand for a king?

Question: What sort of person is Saul as a young king? What are his strengths and weaknesses?

Question: As a child, Samuel saw what had happened to Eli's wicked sons, who died at the hands of the Philistines. He was likely more mindful with his own children. But his sons turned out to be corrupt also.

-How does this happen?

-What can we do to prevent this in our own children?

Lesson 4
The Downfall of Saul
1 Samuel 13–15

Recap

Under constant threat of attack from their neighbors and unwilling to have Samuel's corrupt sons succeed him as judge, the people of Israel demand that Samuel give them a king. Even though by doing so, they reject God as their king, God permits it. Saul becomes king, and he has initial success: the Spirit of God comes upon him multiple times, and he successfully musters an army and drives off the Ammonites.

Saul's First Major Error (1 Samuel 13)

Some time later, Saul's son Jonathan takes an army and attacks a Philistine outpost. This is the first battle in a fresh wave of outright hostilities between the two nations, and their armies mobilize. However, the Philistine army is considerably larger than Israel's, and the situation is dire. Morale is low, but Saul, as he should, waits for Samuel to arrive to make offerings to the Lord on their behalf.

Read: 1 Samuel 13:6–9

When the Israelites saw that their situation was critical and that their army was hard pressed, they hid in caves and thickets, among the rocks, and in pits and cisterns. Some Hebrews even crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead.

Saul remained at Gilgal, and all the troops with him were quaking with fear. He waited seven days, the time set by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and Saul's men began to scatter. So he said, "Bring me the burnt offering and the fellowship offerings." And Saul offered up the burnt offering.

Question: What did Saul do wrong?

Because of his impatience, worry, and lack of faith, Saul knowingly sins. Unwilling to wait any longer for Samuel, he offers the burnt offering, a task only the priests may fulfill.

Immediately after he does so (note the timing), Samuel arrives.

Read: 1 Samuel 13:11–14

“What have you done?” asked Samuel.

Saul replied, “When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Mikmash, I thought, ‘Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the Lord’s favor.’ So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering.”

“You have done a foolish thing,” Samuel said. “You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people, because you have not kept the Lord’s command.”

We are not given Saul’s response to this rejection. He departs with a small army, 600 men. They are in bad shape—lacking proper weapons, they are armed with sharpened farm equipment: sickles, axes, mattocks, and pitchforks. But despite their situation and God’s judgment against Saul, God has not abandoned them.

Victory over the Philistines (1 Samuel 14)

Jonathan, ever the brave and impulsive one, takes his armor bearer and, unbeknownst to his father, raids a Philistine outpost, where the two of them kill about 20 people. A panic “sent by God” (v. 15) afflicts the entire Philistine army, and it scatters.

Saul’s lookouts report to him what is happening. He begins to inquire of the Lord by calling for the priest and the Ark, but as the tumult in the Philistine camp increases, he abandons these efforts and takes his men into battle. He finds the Philistines “in total confusion, striking each other with their swords” (v. 20). The Israelites rout and then pursue the Philistine army: God has rescued them from a superior force.

However, Saul has made a rash and ill-advised decision: he has made his men swear an oath not to eat before evening, until he has defeated the Philistines—not a wise tactic for an army on the move that needs to keep its strength up.

Jonathan hasn't heard about the oath, and when he finds a honeycomb in the forest, he eats from it. When the soldiers call him out for it, Jonathan criticizes his father: "My father has made trouble for the country. See how my eyes brightened when I tasted a little of this honey. How much better it would have been if the men had eaten today some of the plunder they took from their enemies. Would not the slaughter of the Philistines have been even greater?" (vv. 29–30).

The army of Israel completes its victory over the Philistines. By this point, the men are so hungry that they take the livestock they have plundered and kill and eat without taking time to drain the blood fully in accordance with Jewish dietary law. Thus, they have obeyed Saul's command, but broken God's.

To his credit, when he sees this, Saul has the men begin to slaughter the animals properly. He then builds an altar to the Lord—his first—and inquires of the Lord as to whether he should pursue the Philistines further. But God does not answer him right away.

Saul concludes that this means there is sin in his camp. When he discovers that Jonathan has broken the oath and eaten, he is ready to put his son to death. Perhaps, after his rebuke by Samuel, Saul is trying too hard to serve God. Yet it seems that he does not fundamentally understand how to please the Lord. Fortunately, the men of the army intervene and dissuade the king from putting his son to death: Jonathan is a hero to them, one of Israel's great warriors.

After this, the Philistines withdraw to their own land for a time. Yet Saul has other invaders to combat—the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Edomites, and the Amalekites—and hostilities with the Philistines will resume and continue all through the rest of Saul's life.

Saul's Second Major Error (1 Samuel 15)

Samuel tells Saul to attack the Amalekites and totally destroy them for attacking the Israelites back when they had come up out of Egypt. This is different from conventional warfare; this will entail killing every man, woman, and child and all of the livestock, as Joshua had been commanded to do on various occasions in his initial conquest of the Promised Land. Saul is victorious, but instead of obeying Samuel's instructions fully, he takes the king as a hostage and plunders the best of the livestock.

Read: 1 Samuel 15:10–23

Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel: "I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions." Samuel was angry, and he cried out to the Lord all that night.

Early in the morning Samuel got up and went to meet Saul, but he was told, "Saul has gone to Carmel. There he has set up a monument in his own honor and has turned and gone on down to Gilgal."

When Samuel reached him, Saul said, "The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord's instructions."

But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?"

Saul answered, "The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the Lord your God, but we totally destroyed the rest."

"Enough!" Samuel said to Saul. "Let me tell you what the Lord said to me last night."

"Tell me," Saul replied.

Samuel said, "Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel. And he sent you on a mission, saying, 'Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; wage war against them until you have wiped them out.' Why did you not obey the Lord? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the Lord?"

"But I did obey the Lord," Saul said. "I went on the mission the Lord assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord your God at Gilgal."

But Samuel replied: "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king."

Question: What did Saul do wrong?

When Samuel arrives to confront Saul, Saul makes a patently false statement: "I have carried out the Lord's instructions" (v. 13). But Samuel is having none of it. "I can hear the animals that you were supposed to kill," he says. Saul responds with a noble-sounding but weak excuse: "My soldiers wanted to sacrifice them to the Lord." When pressed on why he did not obey the Lord, Saul clings to this excuse. Samuel then drops the hammer: "Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king" (v. 23).

Saul says, “I have sinned. I violated the Lord’s command and your instructions. I was afraid of the men and so I gave in to them” (v. 24). Even as he repents, he has another excuse.

Samuel tells him, “You have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel!” (v. 26). Samuel then puts King Agag to death, doing Saul’s job for him.

This is the bitter end to their relationship: “Then Samuel left for Ramah, but Saul went up to his home in Gibeah of Saul. Until the day Samuel died, he did not go to see Saul again, though Samuel mourned for him. And the Lord regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel” (vv. 34–35).

God will choose a new king, one who will not reject the word of the Lord. But it will be many years before this new king takes the throne, and things will get much worse for Saul before he does.

Discussion

Question: Why was Saul unfit to be king?

Question: Why did Saul find depending on God so difficult?

Question: Why might God have chosen Saul, knowing that he would not be obedient?

Question: What does Samuel mean when he says “obedience is better than sacrifice?”

-What significance does this have for us today?

-What sins and challenges do we face where we are tempted to behave as Saul did?

Lesson 5
The Rise of David
1 Samuel 16–17

Recap

After a respectably promising start as the king that Samuel warned the people not to ask for, Saul makes two grave errors. First, out of fear and impatience, he intrudes upon the office of the priests, making burnt offerings when Samuel is late to arrive. Second, he disobeys the direct order of God, taking plunder for himself and his men that he should have destroyed. God therefore rejects him as king, saying that he will tear the kingdom away from Saul and give it to another (1 Samuel 15:28).

Samuel Anoints David (1 Samuel 16:1–13)

After the events of chapter 15, Samuel and Saul have had a bitter falling out. As this chapter opens, Samuel is mourning for Saul. It is not difficult to see why. From the beginning, Samuel vehemently opposed appointing a human king, correctly recognizing that doing so entailed a rejection of God as king of Israel. After a promising start, Saul's reign has gone downhill, as Saul has used his power to serve his own interests and to do things he had no right to do. Perhaps Samuel sees a good man corrupted by power and insecurity.

God says to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king" (v. 1). Samuel's response is startling: "How can I go? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me" (v. 2). Yet he is likely correct. As we will see, Saul is now in the full grip of his insecurity.

God gives Samuel a ploy to use: he is to take a heifer to sacrifice and to invite Jesse to the sacrifice. Samuel obeys. When he arrives at Bethlehem, the elders of the town are afraid: they know that there is political upheaval—perhaps they also fear reprisals from Saul—and they don't want any trouble. Samuel assures them that he comes in peace—he isn't there to make a scene—and he consecrates the elders and Jesse and his sons.

When Samuel sees Eliab, Jesse's oldest son, he thinks, "Surely the Lord's anointed stands here before the Lord" (v. 6). But God tells him, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (v. 7). Eliab is tall and handsome, a kingly figure—but so was Saul. After everything that has happened, even Samuel is still thinking in this mode.

Samuel proceeds to review seven of Jesse's sons, one by one, but God rejects them all. David, the youngest, isn't even there; he is tending the sheep. Samuel insists that he be summoned. When David arrives, "glowing with health" and having "a fine appearance and handsome features," (v. 12), God tells Samuel, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one." Samuel does so, anointing David in the presence of his brothers, "and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David" (v. 13).

While this anointing is obviously a profoundly important moment, it has no immediate political significance: this is a private, secret matter—no one outside this group knows that David is to be the next king. There will be no rebellion, no attempt by David and his family to overthrow the king; this is a promise for the future to be waited for.

David Enters Saul's Service (1 Samuel 16:14–23)

Here the narrative shifts back to King Saul, for whom things have become black indeed. We are immediately told, "Now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him" (v. 14).

Now, David is not yet king, and nobody knows about his anointing yet. But we know about it, and thus the contrast between verses 13 and 14 is particularly striking: the Spirit comes upon David in power. The Spirit departs from Saul.

Saul instead receives "an evil spirit from the Lord" to torment him. No doubt he is waiting restlessly for Samuel's prophecy to be fulfilled, for the kingdom to be taken away from him. Doom is hanging over his head, and it is entirely his own doing, as he should be well aware.

Saul's attendants suggest finding someone to play the harp to soothe Saul during his tormented moments. One recommends David, and he gives us some insight

as to the sort of person David is: “He is a brave man and a warrior. He speaks well and is a fine-looking man. And the Lord is with him” (v. 18).

1 Samuel 16:21–23

David came to Saul and entered his service. Saul liked him very much, and David became one of his armor-bearers. Then Saul sent word to Jesse, saying, “Allow David to remain in my service, for I am pleased with him.”

Whenever the spirit from God came on Saul, David would take up his lyre and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him.

What a wonderful twist in the story this is. These are two men with vastly different natures, vastly different relations to God. Their destinies are in total opposition: one is the king, while the other will replace him. Now here they are together, and Saul has no idea.

David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17)

Here we come to one of the most famous stories in the Bible, one of the very first that we ever learn. But like many of the Bible stories that we’ve known since childhood, there are details we may not be aware of because we’re so familiar with the simplified version.

The Philistines have rallied the troops and are coming out again for battle against Israel. Here we meet their champion, Goliath of Gath, the most famous Philistine of all. He is described as standing nine feet tall and wearing heavy armor.

As was a custom of the time, he challenges Israel to send out a man to fight him one on one. He says, “Choose a man and have him come down to me. If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us” (vv. 9–10). This is likely little more than bravado; it is difficult to imagine any nation submitting meekly after such a defeat (or to imagine Saul allowing David to fight him if these terms were to be abided by), and indeed, the Philistines retreat rather than surrender after his death.

In any case, Israel has no one who will fight him. For forty days, the armies are camped across from each other, and on each of these days, Goliath comes out

to taunt Israel. Goliath embodies the Philistines' military superiority, and his daily presence and taunts deliver serious blows to Israel's morale.

Meanwhile, David has left Saul's court; we are told that he "went back and forth from Saul to tend his father's sheep at Bethlehem" (v. 15). His three oldest brothers are soldiers in Saul's camp, and their father Jesse sends David with food for them. He arrives at the front in time to hear Goliath's daily challenge. But where the soldiers see defeat, David sees an opportunity.

1 Samuel 17:25–27

Now the Israelites had been saying, "Do you see how this man keeps coming out? He comes out to defy Israel. The king will give great wealth to the man who kills him. He will also give him his daughter in marriage and will exempt his family from taxes in Israel."

David asked the men standing near him, "What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and removes this disgrace from Israel? Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?"

They repeated to him what they had been saying and told him, "This is what will be done for the man who kills him."

David's attitude here, in sharp contrast to the terror and dismay of the army, is almost humorous in its frankness. "We are the army of the living God; why hasn't someone just gone and killed him already?"

This is a breath of fresh air in the camp, and it makes its way to Saul, who summons David. David immediately volunteers to go and fight Goliath. Saul, naturally, thinks that this is a terrible idea: "You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a young man, and he has been a warrior from his youth" (v. 32). In other words, "If you go out there, you will get yourself killed for certain."

David counters by citing both his credentials and God's: "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine" (vv. 34–37).

Whether he is swayed by David's argument or just doesn't want to waste any more time with a clearly suicidal young man, Saul relents. He calls for armor to be put on David, but David refuses it, as he has not had practice wearing it. Instead, he takes only his staff, his sling, and five stones.

When Goliath sees the opponent he's been waiting more than a month to fight, he is, in a word, insulted: "He said to David, 'Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?' And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. 'Come here,' he said, 'and I'll give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals!'" (vv. 43–44).

This sort of trash-talking was a custom of the time (as it has been, honestly, for all time). David responds with bold talk of his own, but takes a different tone: "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give all of you into our hands" (vv. 45–47). His trust is in God; he is giving God all of the credit in advance.

This next part you surely know: David hurls his stone, and it strikes Goliath in the forehead, below the protection of his helmet, stunning him. A perfect strike. Goliath falls facedown to the ground, and David runs over, takes Goliath's presumably oversized sword, finishes him off, and then chops Goliath's head off with it, just like he said he would.

This turns the tables completely. The Philistine army flees immediately. The Israelite army suddenly finds its fighting spirit and pursues them all the way back to the Philistines' cities. When the victory has been won, the Israelites return and plunder the Philistine camp. David takes Goliath's head to Jerusalem—a national trophy—and keeps the giant's weapons for himself.

With all this accomplished, Saul now takes a greater interest in who David is and what family he comes from—perhaps because he has promised his daughter in marriage to the man who killed Goliath (v. 25), and perhaps because David is Israel's newest rising star.

Discussion

Question: In only two chapters, we get a pretty clear picture of the sort of person David is.

- How would you characterize David?
- How is he different from Saul?

Question: Although he has been anointed king of Israel, David does not attempt to become king by his own efforts.

- Why?
- What does that say about him?

Question: God has a less overt presence here than previously in 1 Samuel.

- What is God's role in this part of the story?
- How was he active?

Lesson 6
Saul's Murderous Jealousy
1 Samuel 18–24

Recap

After rejecting Saul as king of Israel, God sends Samuel to anoint David as the next king, which he does in secret. In a wonderful twist, David enters Saul's service, playing the harp to soothe him. After killing the giant Philistine warrior Goliath, David begins to rise to prominence.

Saul's Jealousy of David (1 Samuel 18)

David grows ever closer to Saul's family. He becomes best friends with Saul's son Jonathan, and "from that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return home to his family" (v. 2). In addition to obtaining a prime place in court, David quickly rises in rank in the army due to his many successes. His popularity is soaring.

One day, King Saul hears the people singing, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands" (v. 7). Saul, naturally, becomes angry and jealous. He thinks, "What more can [David] get but the kingdom?" (v. 8). From this point on, he becomes suspicious of David.

This is all quite understandable. Saul, as we have seen, is profoundly insecure. No doubt he is constantly thinking about how God is going to take the kingdom away from him. And now, because of his military success and popularity with the army, David is a prime candidate.

Read: 1 Samuel 18:10–19

The next day an evil spirit from God came forcefully on Saul. He was prophesying in his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he usually did. Saul had a spear in his hand and he hurled it, saying to himself, "I'll pin David to the wall." But David eluded him twice.

Saul was afraid of David, because the Lord was with David but had departed from Saul. So he sent David away from him and gave him command over a thousand men, and David led the troops in their campaigns. In everything he did he had great success, because

the Lord was with him. When Saul saw how successful he was, he was afraid of him. But all Israel and Judah loved David, because he led them in their campaigns.

Saul said to David, "Here is my older daughter Merab. I will give her to you in marriage; only serve me bravely and fight the battles of the Lord." For Saul said to himself, "I will not raise a hand against him. Let the Philistines do that!"

But David said to Saul, "Who am I, and what is my family or my clan in Israel, that I should become the king's son-in-law?" So when the time came for Merab, Saul's daughter, to be given to David, she was given in marriage to Adriel of Meholah.

Question: What is Saul's problem?

There are a number of noteworthy goings-on here. Most notably, Saul attempts to outright murder David, but David escapes. Saul is afraid of David "because the Lord was with David but had departed from Saul" (v. 12). Perhaps in David he sees how things had been for him before his self-centered disobedience, or else someone who is better than he is. So he sends David away, which is probably best for both of them under the circumstances.

After more military successes by David, Saul offers his daughter Merab in marriage to him. David has presumably already won her hand by killing Goliath (17:25), but the promise has not been fulfilled. Saul has another condition in this offer: "fight my battles." No doubt Saul is hoping that David will die in battle against the Philistines. But David declines, whether through true humility or because he sees through Saul's plots, and Merab is given to another.

But Saul gets a second chance. His younger daughter Michal is in love with David. Saul says, "Now you have a second opportunity to become my son-in-law" (v. 21). His price is one hundred Philistine foreskins. The collection of foreskins was not such an unusual practice in ancient war—the Egyptians, who also circumcised, did it too. David agrees to these terms. Saul wants 100 foreskins—David comes back with 200, and he presents them to the king, and thus he becomes the king's son-in-law.

Read: 1 Samuel 18:28–30

When Saul realized that the Lord was with David and that his daughter Michal loved David, Saul became still more afraid of him, and he remained his enemy the rest of his days.

The Philistine commanders continued to go out to battle, and as often as they did, David met with more success than the rest of Saul's officers, and his name became well known.

Saul's plots have met with less than zero success. Not only has David survived his battles with the Philistines, he continues to gain in status.

Saul Tries to Murder David (1 Samuel 19)

Saul gives up on subtlety entirely and outright commands his attendants to kill David. However, this group includes Jonathan, David's best friend. Jonathan warns David to hide, and he then goes to remind his father of all of the great things that David has done for Israel. Saul is moved, and he vows, "As surely as the Lord lives, David will not be put to death" (v. 6). So David returns to court and plays the harp for Saul again, as he had before.

However, before long, the evil spirit returns to Saul, and he tries to kill David with a spear again. But David escapes. Saul sends assassins to David's house, but Michal helps him:

Read: 1 Samuel 19:12–17

So Michal let David down through a window, and he fled and escaped. Then Michal took an idol and laid it on the bed, covering it with a garment and putting some goats' hair at the head.

When Saul sent the men to capture David, Michal said, "He is ill."

Then Saul sent the men back to see David and told them, "Bring him up to me in his bed so that I may kill him." But when the men entered, there was the idol in the bed, and at the head was some goats' hair.

Saul said to Michal, "Why did you deceive me like this and send my enemy away so that he escaped?"

Michal told him, "He said to me, 'Let me get away. Why should I kill you?'"

Michal turns in an impressive performance here: first, she successfully pulls off the old stuff-the-blankets ploy, and then she lies to her father, convincing him that she wasn't his accomplice.

David escapes to Samuel at his prophet school at Ramah. Saul gets word of it and sends men to capture him, but the spirit of God comes upon them, and they prophesy. Saul doesn't take the hint. He sends two more groups, and they both prophesy. Finally, Saul goes himself: "So Saul went to Naioth at Ramah. But the Spirit of God came even on him, and he walked along prophesying until he came

to Naioth. He stripped off his garments, and he too prophesied in Samuel's presence. He lay naked all that day and all that night. This is why people say, 'Is Saul also among the prophets?'" (vv. 23–24).

Question: What message is God sending to Saul here?

David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 20)

David goes to Jonathan and demands to know what he has done to deserve this treatment from the king. Jonathan agrees to feel out his father at the New Moon festival, which David is obliged but afraid to attend.

Read: 1 Samuel 20:24–34

So David hid in the field, and when the New Moon feast came, the king sat down to eat. He sat in his customary place by the wall, opposite Jonathan, and Abner sat next to Saul, but David's place was empty. Saul said nothing that day, for he thought, "Something must have happened to David to make him ceremonially unclean—surely he is unclean." But the next day, the second day of the month, David's place was empty again. Then Saul said to his son Jonathan, "Why hasn't the son of Jesse come to the meal, either yesterday or today?"

Jonathan answered, "David earnestly asked me for permission to go to Bethlehem. He said, 'Let me go, because our family is observing a sacrifice in the town and my brother has ordered me to be there. If I have found favor in your eyes, let me get away to see my brothers.' That is why he has not come to the king's table."

Saul's anger flared up at Jonathan and he said to him, "You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don't I know that you have sided with the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of the mother who bore you? As long as the son of Jesse lives on this earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established. Now send someone to bring him to me, for he must die!"

"Why should he be put to death? What has he done?" Jonathan asked his father. But Saul hurled his spear at him to kill him. Then Jonathan knew that his father intended to kill David.

Jonathan got up from the table in fierce anger; on that second day of the feast he did not eat, because he was grieved at his father's shameful treatment of David.

Jonathan realizes that his father has completely lost it—not only does he seek to kill David as a usurper; in his rage, Saul throws a spear even at his own son. Furious, Jonathan leaves and meets up with David, and the two have a tearful farewell. Then David leaves Saul's court for good.

David on the Run (1 Samuel 21)

Alone, or with just a few companions, David flees to Nob, where he persuades Ahimelek the priest to give him some of the consecrated bread and the sword of Goliath. Also present here, we are told, is Doeg the Edomite, Saul's head shepherd. This detail will be important later.

David is desperate indeed, for from here, he flees to the Philistine city of Gath. However, the servants of Achish, king of Gath, recognize him, and they know the song: "Isn't this David, the king of the land? Isn't he the one they sing about in their dances: 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands'?" (v. 11).

David, afraid for his life, pretends to be crazy, drawing on the walls and drooling down his beard. The king of Gath has no patience at all to listen to allegations that this man is one of his country's greatest enemies. He says, "Look at the man! He is insane! Why bring him to me? Am I so short of madmen that you have to bring this fellow here to carry on like this in front of me? Must this man come into my house?" (vv. 14–15).

The Wrath of Saul (1 Samuel 22)

David leaves Gath and meets up with his brothers. "All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around him, and he became their commander" (v. 2). Although he is an outlaw, David becomes the leader of a band of about 400 men. To keep his family safe, he arranges for his parents to stay with the king of Moab.

Saul, meanwhile, is still angry. Having found out about how his son has helped David, he sees conspiracy everywhere. He says to his officials, "Listen, men of Benjamin! Will the son of Jesse give all of you fields and vineyards? Will he make all of you commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds? Is that why you have all conspired against me? No one tells me when my son makes a covenant with the son of Jesse. None of you is concerned about me or tells me that my son has incited my servant to lie in wait for me, as he does today" (vv. 7–8). And now here comes Doeg the Edomite, with the report of how Ahimelek helped David.

Read: 1 Samuel 22:11–15

Then the king sent for the priest Ahimelek son of Ahitub and all the men of his family, who were the priests at Nob, and they all came to the king. Saul said, "Listen now, son of Ahitub."

"Yes, my lord," he answered.

Saul said to him, "Why have you conspired against me, you and the son of Jesse, giving him bread and a sword and inquiring of God for him, so that he has rebelled against me and lies in wait for me, as he does today?"

Ahimelek answered the king, "Who of all your servants is as loyal as David, the king's son-in-law, captain of your bodyguard and highly respected in your household? Was that day the first time I inquired of God for him? Of course not! Let not the king accuse your servant or any of his father's family, for your servant knows nothing at all about this whole affair."

Ahimelek doesn't know what this is all about. David lied and told him that he was on a secret mission for the king (21:2). And whether or not he knows that David and the king are on the outs, he certainly hasn't had any part in anything remotely approximating a rebellion.

Saul's response shows that he has completely lost his grip on rationality.

Read: 1 Samuel 22:16–19

But the king said, "You will surely die, Ahimelek, you and your whole family."

Then the king ordered the guards at his side: "Turn and kill the priests of the Lord, because they too have sided with David. They knew he was fleeing, yet they did not tell me."

But the king's officials were unwilling to raise a hand to strike the priests of the Lord.

The king then ordered Doeg, "You turn and strike down the priests." So Doeg the Edomite turned and struck them down. That day he killed eighty-five men who wore the linen ephod. He also put to the sword Nob, the town of the priests, with its men and women, its children and infants, and its cattle, donkeys and sheep.

The king's officials recognize what a vile command they've been given—to not only wipe out a family and a town in cold blood, but a family and town of priests. But Doeg, ever the king's diligent lackey, obeys.

Only one of Ahimelek's sons, Abiathar, escapes to tell David what has happened. David doesn't sound particularly surprised. He says, "That day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, I knew he would be sure to tell Saul. I am responsible for the death of your whole family. Stay with me; don't be afraid. The man who wants to kill you is trying to kill me too. You will be safe with me" (vv. 22–23).

Saul Pursues David (1 Samuel 23)

David gets wind of a Philistine raid, and he inquires of the Lord twice as to whether he should attack. "Attack," God says. David does, and he wins a resounding victory. Even though he is an outlaw, he still has his nation's defense at heart.

Saul hears of the battle and pursues. David inquires of the Lord about Saul's plans, and as he and his men hide in the hills of the Desert of Ziph, God prevents Saul from finding them.

David meets up one last time with Jonathan, who has a pretty clear picture of what's to come: "Don't be afraid," he said. "My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this" (v. 17).

Afterward, the Ziphites tell Saul where David is, but just when he seems he's about to catch David, he gets the news that the Philistines are raiding again. Saul has to break off his pursuit to deal with them, and David escapes once more.

Discussion

Question: What motivates Saul in these chapters?

-Why does he find depending on God so difficult?

Question: In chapter 22, David says that he feels responsible for the deaths of the priests. Is he? Why?

Question: Again, God has a less overt presence here than previously in 1 Samuel.

-What is God's role in this part of the story?

-How was he active?

Question: We have seen many cases where a righteous father has wicked sons. With Saul and Jonathan, however, the roles are reversed. How does a man like Saul produce a son as noble and self-sacrificing as Jonathan?

Lesson 7
David More Honorable Than Saul
1 Samuel 24–26

Recap

Saul has become obsessed with David, pursuing him relentlessly to kill him because he is convinced that David is planning to overthrow him. But just as Saul is about to find him, he is called away to deal with Philistine raids.

David Spares Saul’s Life (1 Samuel 24)

No sooner has Saul finished dealing with the Philistines than he’s right back at it, hunting for David with 3,000 men in the Desert of En Gedi. When he finds a cool cave, Saul goes in, apparently alone, to rest. Unbeknownst to him, however, David and his men have been using this cave as a hideout.

David’s men see this as a golden opportunity. They say to David, “This is the day the Lord spoke of when he said to you, ‘I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish’” (v. 4).

This is as clean and simple a chance for David to solve all of his problems in an instant as could possibly be imagined. Nothing stands between David and killing or capturing Saul. This is his direct path to the kingship. David creeps up to Saul as he rests—and only cuts off the corner of Saul’s robe.

When he returns, David feels “conscience-stricken” (v. 5) for what he has done, and he rebukes the men: “The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord’s anointed, or lay my hand on him; for he is the anointed of the Lord” (v. 6).

Question: What is David’s attitude about cutting a corner from the king’s robe?

-Why does he feel guilty?

-Is he right to feel this way?

Read: 1 Samuel 24:8–22

Then David went out of the cave and called out to Saul, “My lord the king!”
 When Saul looked behind him, David bowed down and prostrated himself with

his face to the ground. He said to Saul, “Why do you listen when men say, ‘David is bent on harming you’? This day you have seen with your own eyes how the Lord delivered you into my hands in the cave. Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said, ‘I will not lay my hand on my lord, because he is the Lord’s anointed.’ See, my father, look at this piece of your robe in my hand! I cut off the corner of your robe but did not kill you. See that there is nothing in my hand to indicate that I am guilty of wrongdoing or rebellion. I have not wronged you, but you are hunting me down to take my life. May the Lord judge between you and me. And may the Lord avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you. As the old saying goes, ‘From evildoers come evil deeds,’ so my hand will not touch you.

“Against whom has the king of Israel come out? Who are you pursuing? A dead dog? A flea? May the Lord be our judge and decide between us. May he consider my cause and uphold it; may he vindicate me by delivering me from your hand.”

When David finished saying this, Saul asked, “Is that your voice, David my son?” And he wept aloud. “You are more righteous than I,” he said. “You have treated me well, but I have treated you badly. You have just now told me about the good you did to me; the Lord delivered me into your hands, but you did not kill me. When a man finds his enemy, does he let him get away unharmed? May the Lord reward you well for the way you treated me today. I know that you will surely be king and that the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hands. Now swear to me by the Lord that you will not kill off my descendants or wipe out my name from my father’s family.”

So David gave his oath to Saul. Then Saul returned home, but David and his men went up to the stronghold.

David waits until Saul leaves the cave. Then he goes outside and respectfully and submissively confronts the king. “Look,” he says. “I could have killed you just now. But I have never meant you any harm. Why are you trying to kill me?”

Saul’s response is a bit surprising. He is moved by what David has said, and he has a rare lucid moment. He admits to his unjust treatment of David, and, for the first time, he acknowledges aloud that David will be king after him. Saul asks David to swear by the Lord that he will not kill Saul’s descendants, and David swears.

After this reconciliation of sorts, the two peaceably go their separate ways. It seems that this might be a happy ending to their story—or as happy as could be expected at this point—if it *were* the end. Unfortunately, it isn’t.

David, Nabal, and Abigail (1 Samuel 25)

Samuel dies, we are told, and all Israel assembles to mourn for him. Then David and his men move down to the Desert of Maon, where they serve as a militia of sorts. As we have seen throughout the book of 1 Samuel, raids into Israel were common. David and his men earn their keep by protecting the flock owners of the region (v. 21)—a valuable service.

Among these flock owners is a certain wealthy landowner, Nabal. We are told several noteworthy things about him. For one, his name means “fool” (v. 25). And while his wife Abigail is “intelligent and beautiful,” Nabal himself is “surly and mean” (v. 4).

Shearing time arrives. This is a time of celebration and bounty, the sheep equivalent of a harvest festival. This is the appropriate time for David and his men to be paid for their services: “So [David] sent ten young men and said to them, ‘Go up to Nabal at Carmel and greet him in my name. Say to him: “Long life to you! Good health to you and your household! And good health to all that is yours! Now I hear that it is sheep-shearing time. When your shepherds were with us, we did not mistreat them, and the whole time they were at Carmel nothing of theirs was missing. Ask your own servants and they will tell you. Therefore be favorable toward my men, since we come at a festive time. Please give your servants and your son David whatever you can find for them”’” (vv. 7–8).

This is not an unreasonable demand; it is a fair request for what is due, politely made. Yet Nabal responds coldly: “Who is this David? Who is this son of Jesse? Many servants are breaking away from their masters these days. Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where?” (vv. 10–11).

Even living out in the desert, Nabal surely knows who David is—he’s one of the most famous men in Israel; even the Philistines know the popular songs about him, and his rift with King Saul would certainly be the talk of the nation. No, this is pure disrespect: “David isn’t worth my time, or my resources.”

David is absolutely furious—this is a side of him we don’t often see. He takes 400 armed men and marches on Nabal’s property, fully intending to wipe out the man’s entire household (vv. 23, 34).

In this state of emergency, Nabal’s servants appeal to Abigail: “David sent messengers from the wilderness to give our master his greetings, but he hurled insults at them. Yet these men were very good to us. They did not mistreat us,

and the whole time we were out in the fields near them nothing was missing. Night and day they were a wall around us the whole time we were herding our sheep near them. Now think it over and see what you can do, because disaster is hanging over our master and his whole household. He is such a wicked man that no one can talk to him” (vv. 14–17).

David has acted honorably; Nabal is the one who has broken faith. Abigail acts immediately: she loads donkeys with good food of all kinds and takes them out to David—without telling her husband. She falls down at David’s feet, offering her gift and asking him to look past her husband’s folly. David accepts her gift, praising her good judgment and timely action, and he and his men turn back.

When Abigail returns home, she finds Nabal drunk amidst the shearing festivities, and she says nothing. In the morning, however, when Nabal hears how close he came to utter destruction, “his heart failed him and he became like a stone” (v. 37). “About ten days later, the Lord struck Nabal and he died” (v. 38).

When David hears of his death, he says, “Praise be to the Lord, who has upheld my cause against Nabal for treating me with contempt. He has kept his servant from doing wrong and has brought Nabal’s wrongdoing down on his own head” (v. 39).

David must have been quite impressed with Abigail, because he takes her as one of his wives (he has also married Ahinoam of Jezreel, we are told). Meanwhile Saul has given his daughter Michal, who loves David and helped him escape, away to another, certainly without her consent. Much later, when David is jockeying with Saul’s family to establish himself as king, he demands her back, which results in the sad and memorable scene in which her new husband tearfully follows behind on her way back to David (2 Samuel 3:12–16).

David Spares Saul’s Life Again (1 Samuel 26)

This chapter plays out in remarkable parallel to chapter 24. Although David and Saul had gone their separate ways in peace, The Ziphites put it into Saul’s head again to hunt for David, which he does with an army of 3,000 men.

The Lord puts Saul’s camp into a deep sleep (v. 12), and Saul and Abishai the priest, whose family Saul exterminated, sneak into the camp and make it all the way to where Saul is sleeping without being detected. Abishai, very understandably, volunteers to kill Saul, but David says no, for the same reason

as before: he is not willing to harm the Lord's anointed, regardless of his crimes. He says, "As surely as the Lord lives, the Lord himself will strike him, or his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish" (v. 10), but David himself will not have a hand in it. He will continue to wait for God to make him king. But, much like how he cut off a corner of Saul's robe in chapter 24, David absconds with Saul's spear and water jug.

David leaves and calls to the camp from afar, taunting Abner, the general of Saul's army. Saul hears, and he and David have an exchange that is quite similar to the one they had in chapter 24: David asks Saul why he's still hunting him, and Saul responds contritely, saying, "I have sinned. Come back, David my son. Because you considered my life precious today, I will not try to harm you again. Surely I have acted like a fool and have been terribly wrong" (v. 21).

But David will not go back. He will not even cross over to give the king his spear back ("Let one of your young men come over and get it" (v. 22), he says. He is unwilling to harm Saul, but neither will he trust him. Once again, they go their separate ways—both to worse times ahead.

Discussion

Question: Again, God has a relatively less overt presence here than previously in 1 Samuel.

- What is God's role in this part of the story?
- How was he active?

Question: What can we learn from the story of David, Nabal, and Abigail?

Question: Was David right not to raise his hand against Saul purely because he was the Lord's anointed? Why?

- How, if at all, do the vile things Saul did factor into this?
- What lessons can we learn from David's resolve to wait for the Lord's timing?
- How do we juxtapose this with David's decision to kill Nabal (which, to his later relief, he did not go through with)?
- Do ends ever justify means?

Lesson 8
The End of Saul
1 Samuel 27–31

Recap

Saul hunts David relentlessly to kill him. Yet David passes up two opportunities to kill the king, being unwilling to harm the Lord's anointed, regardless of the severity of his crimes. David shows a general practice of conducting himself honorably where others are dishonorable.

David among the Philistines (1 Samuel 27)

Saul has been after David for a long time now, and while David has been able to make peace with the king twice, he clearly believes that Saul will never stop hunting him. He says to himself, "One of these days I will be destroyed by the hand of Saul. The best thing I can do is to escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will give up searching for me anywhere in Israel, and I will slip out of his hand" (v. 1). While effective in this regard, this is a desperate act, not only because of the risk involved, but because of the situation in which David will become entangled, as we will see.

David and his 600 men go to settle in Gath and to serve Achish, its king. The first time David went to Gath, he pretended to be insane to disguise his identity so as not to be killed. There is no need this time; the spat between David and Saul has become known to all. David is there publicly. David remains in Philistine territory for sixteen months, and during that time, he seems to reach a moral low point. He and his men earn their livings as raiders.

Read: 1 Samuel 27:8–11

Now David and his men went up and raided the Geshurites, the Girzites and the Amalekites. (From ancient times these peoples had lived in the land extending to Shur and Egypt.) Whenever David attacked an area, he did not leave a man or woman alive, but took sheep and cattle, donkeys and camels, and clothes. Then he returned to Achish.

When Achish asked, "Where did you go raiding today?" David would say, "Against the Negev of Judah" or "Against the Negev of Jerahmeel" or "Against the Negev of the Kenites." He did not leave a man or woman

alive to be brought to Gath, for he thought, “They might inform on us and say, ‘This is what David did.’” And such was his practice as long as he lived in Philistine territory.

Question: What is David doing?

David is unwilling to raid the lands of his own people. Instead, he attacks the enemies of Israel. However, he lies to Achish and says that all his spoil has come from territories belonging to Israel. To cover this lie, David massacres the people he raids, leaving none alive who might expose him.

Achish is fooled, however: “Achish trusted David and said to himself, ‘He has become so obnoxious to his people, the Israelites, that he will be my servant for life’” (v. 12).

Saul and the Witch (1 Samuel 28)

David has earned the trust of Achish, but he now finds himself in a more difficult situation: the Philistines are preparing to fight against Israel, and Achis informs David that he and his men are expected to fight alongside them. David’s reply is calculated and ambiguous: “Then you will see for yourself what your servant can do” (v. 2).

Meanwhile, King Saul draws up the armies of Israel to meet the Philistines, and he doesn’t like his chances: “When Saul saw the Philistine army, he was afraid; terror filled his heart. He inquired of the Lord, but the Lord did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets” (vv. 5–6). The threat is dire. Saul inquires of the Lord—the historically deferential and correct way for Israel’s leaders to make decisions—but the Lord is ominously silent.

The author of the text provides two important bits of background that inform what follows. First, we are reminded, Samuel is dead, mourned, and buried. Second, Saul has expelled all of the mediums and spiritists from the land.

But Saul is desperate. He wants counsel, an answer. But God isn’t answering, so Saul decides on the next best thing: Samuel. He commands his attendants to find a medium, and when they do, he visits her secretly, at night. After Saul promises not to harm her for her illegal occult practice, she conjures up Samuel.

Saul prostrates himself and says, “I am in great distress. The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has departed from me. He no longer answers me,

either by prophets or by dreams. So I have called on you to tell me what to do” (v. 15). Samuel replies, “Why do you consult me, now that the Lord has departed from you and become your enemy? The Lord has done what he predicted through me. The Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbors—to David. Because you did not obey the Lord or carry out his fierce wrath against the Amalekites, the Lord has done this to you today. The Lord will deliver both Israel and you into the hands of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The Lord will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines” (vv. 16–19).

This is an utterly terrifying message: *The Lord has become your enemy. Tomorrow, you will be dead, and so will your sons.* Saul falls to the ground, terrified, tremendously shaken. His men and the witch urge him to eat, which he finally does, and they depart.

There has been a great deal of consternation over this passage, as it is the only one in the Bible where the spirit of someone dead appears in such a way, and it has often been asked whether this manifestation was genuine, whether it was demonic in origin, or whether it was faked. Such discussion is ultimately tangential to the focus of the story. It should be noted, however, that the writer of the passage, the witch, and Saul treat this Samuel as genuine, and furthermore that the words of this apparition are consistent with the words of the living Samuel, and they all come to pass.

Achish and David (1 Samuel 29)

As the armies mobilize for battle, David finds himself in a dangerous dilemma: he must either fight against his own people (which, we might imagine, he had no intention of doing), or else face the wrath of the Philistines.

Fortunately for David, the other Philistine commanders don’t trust him as well as Achish does. They argue with Achish that David is too great a risk in this situation, that he might turn against them and fight to earn Saul’s favor. Achish acquiesces, telling David, “As surely as the Lord lives, you have been reliable, and I would be pleased to have you serve with me in the army. From the day you came to me until today, I have found no fault in you, but the rulers don’t approve of you. Now turn back and go in peace; do nothing to displease the Philistine rulers” (vv. 6–7).

David is off the hook. He talks a good game, saying, “But what have I done? What have you found against your servant from the day I came to you until now? Why can’t I go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king?” (v. 8), but he and his men leave the Philistine camp.

David and the Amalekites (1 Samuel 30)

David returns to Ziklag, the city Achish gave him, and finds that it has been raided by the Amalekites, who have carried off all of the women and children. The men are extremely bitter—they even talk of stoning David. But David finds strength in God (v. 6). He inquires of the Lord and asks whether he should pursue this raiding party. God tells him to pursue.

All 600 men pursue, but when they reach the Besor Ravine, 200 are too exhausted to continue, and are left behind. An Egyptian, an abandoned Amalekite slave, takes David and his men to the raiders in exchange for assurances of safety.

They find the raiders celebrating and feasting because of all the plunder. David attacks and defeats them soundly, recovering all of their livestock and everyone who had been taken from them, plus other plunder.

But when they return, the 400 who fought don’t want to share the spoils with those who stayed behind, but David establishes an ordinance that all should share alike. When David returns to Ziklag, he sends portions of the plunder to elders throughout Judah in the places where he and his men had traveled and stayed.

The Death of Saul (1 Samuel 31)

Meanwhile, the Philistine and Israelite armies have engaged in battle. This is, suddenly, the end for Saul.

Read: 1 Samuel 31:1–6

Now the Philistines fought against Israel; the Israelites fled before them, and many fell dead on Mount Gilboa. The Philistines were in hot pursuit of Saul and his sons, and they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua. The fighting grew fierce around Saul, and when the archers overtook him, they wounded him critically.

Saul said to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me."

But his armor-bearer was terrified and would not do it; so Saul took his own sword and fell on it. When the armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he too fell on his sword and died with him. So Saul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and all his men died together that same day.

Saul is gravely wounded, perhaps mortally. Whether or not his wounds will prove fatal, he knows that the battle is lost, that his death is imminent. Fearing capture, torture, and abuse at the hands of the Philistines, he asks his armor bearer to kill him quickly. The armor bearer, afraid, refuses, so Saul falls on his own sword and dies, and the armor bearer then does likewise. So ends the tortured and wildly uneven reign of Israel's once-promising first king, with no mention of any appeal or cry to God of any kind.

The army of Israel goes into full retreat, and the Philistines seize and occupy a number of Israelite cities. Saul wished to avoid abuse at the hands of the Philistines; he does not get this wish, although he is not alive to see it:

Read 1 Samuel 31:8–13

The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the dead, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. They cut off his head and stripped off his armor, and they sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to proclaim the news in the temple of their idols and among their people. They put his armor in the temple of the Ashtoreths and fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan.

When the people of Jabesh Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all their valiant men marched through the night to Beth Shan. They took down the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall of Beth Shan and went to Jabesh, where they burned them. Then they took their bones and buried them under a tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and they fasted seven days.

So ends the book of 1 Samuel: with a great victory for David, redeeming a catastrophe, the inevitable downfall of King Saul, which has been many years in coming. It is, to the end, a book of stark contrasts: with the righteous Samuel and Eli's wicked sons, with David's desire to serve the Lord and Saul's repeated failure to do so wholeheartedly, and ultimately with David's rise and Saul's fall.

Aftermath (2 Samuel 1–5)

True to his nature, David will mourn sincerely for Saul, even going so far as to kill a man who claims to have delivered the *coup de grâce*. And he will of course become the next king of Israel, but not easily, and not quickly. He will shortly be anointed king of Judah, but Abner, the commander of Saul's army (and Saul's cousin), will set up Saul's son Ish-bosheth as king in Israel. Civil war will ensue, and will continue for two years, until Ish-bosheth is murdered by men seeking to curry David's favor (David instead has them executed). David will then finally become ruler of the united kingdom of Israel: he will conquer the Jebusite city of Jerusalem and build his capital there, and will have a tumultuous forty-year reign as king.

Discussion

Question: To the end, Saul has profound difficulty turning to the Lord in times of trouble. Why?

-Overall, how would you characterize Saul, as both a man and a king?

Question: In contrast, we are told that in the midst of a dire situation, David "finds strength in God" (30:6).

-What does it mean to find strength in God?

-What was it in David that enabled him to do this?

Question: What are David's character strengths?

-What are his weaknesses?

Question: Again, God has a relatively less overt presence here than previously in 1 Samuel.

-What is God's role in this part of the story?

-How was he active?