

March 15 : Scriptures 1 Samuel 5-8

SUMMARY

As you read through chapter 5, you'll realize it was a terrible idea for the Philistines to take the captured Ark of the Yehovah and place it on triumphant display in their god, Dagon's, temple (5:2). The ancient peoples believed that whichever side won the battle, it was their god who helped them, and the winning side deserved to gloat over the god of the defeated enemy (some cultures indeed believe that same thing today). I get it. And now the Philistines and their petty fish god, Dagon, do too.

It only took one night. Who knows how it happened, but Dagon's statue was face down on the floor by morning, right in front of Yehovah's Ark (His throne, remember?). Gee, almost like some supernatural person forced the idol to submit to the Almighty God or something. (Don't you think it would have been fun to see if it was an angel or some heavenly force that pushed it over?) Well, the Philistine priests probably believe it was an accident. They stand Dagon up again and **boom**, over he goes by the following day, lying in the same place before Israel's God. Yehovah's message? Dagon the demonic is nothing and must submit to the One True God. And to drive home His triumphant point, Yehovah has Dagon's head and hands break off, a demonstration of decapitation and dismemberment any battlefield warrior would understand as total defeat (5:4).

If that weren't enough, Yehovah unloads a boatload of trouble on the Philistine city, Ashdod, where He's vacationing. He hits the populous with "tumors." Yeah, that's the Bible interpretation team's delicate rephrasing of their affliction. The Hebrew is blunt. One set of translators says it was *hemorrhoids!* Yes, it shows the Philistines that claiming victory over the Almighty God can be an excruciating pain in the rear. However, other translations add that mice invaded their region, and the Lord afflicted the Philistines with what seems to be the bubonic plague which causes lumps and swellings in the lymph glands. Either way, the affliction is anywhere from extremely painful to deadly. So, the Ashdodite Philistines do the smart thing – they send the Ark to the neighboring Philistine city, Gath. Brilliant! The Gathites get the same treatment from Yehovah (5:9). So, they decide to move the Ark along to Ekron, to which the Ekronites cry, *"No way in heck are you bringing the death box here!"* Too late.

The Ekronites summon the Philistine leaders to get the thing out of the city because it has already caused seven months of devastation, death, and disease in the Philistine's region. I'd say that was a pretty good decision, don't you? Note that the text says, "God's hand was oppressing them," not that it was the Ark's doing. The Ark is inanimate, but the God who sits upon the throne is very animate! The Israelites used the Ark as a talisman yet

disregarded the Living God who dwelled above the Ark (which reflects how the now-dead Hophni and Phinehas regarded God's stuff). It's not the Ark that wins their battles. It's the One above the Ark who scores the victory. Now the Philistines are learning what it's like to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31).

In chapter 6, the leaders figure out this is a spiritual matter, so they call their priests and diviners for a consultation. Obviously, the Ark must be returned to Israel. But a guilt offering (an *asham* for all of you who paid attention in Leviticus) of golden replicas of mice and "tumors" has to accompany it (6:4). I know. Pretty bizarre, right? So why was a guilt offering of five gold tumors and five gold rats required?

First, they represented the two afflictions plaguing the Philistines, the gold paid honor to Israel's God in return for dishonoring Him, and the number of items represented the five main Philistine cities. Altogether, this act was the official Philistine confession that Yehovah was greater than Dagon, "Give glory to Israel's God, and perhaps he will stop oppressing you, your gods, and your land" (6:5).

Secondly, do you remember the nature of an *asham/guilt* offering to Yehovah? It was brought to the Lord by a person who had deprived another of his rights or desecrated something holy. I'd say it was the "desecrating something holy" aspect in play here. The unholy Philistines dared to desecrate God's holy Ark by placing it in their demon god's temple while proclaiming Dagon's superiority over Yehovah, a right the Philistines had no right to claim. What's also fascinating is the spiritual leaders encourage the leaders to get to it quickly by reminding them of what Yehovah had done to the Egyptians *some three hundred years earlier!* Yes, Yehovah's triumph over Egypt was still reverberating throughout the region.

The leaders get to the work, and the Philistine priests add a control mechanism. They use two milk cows, separated from their calves, to pull the new cart. Why? Because the natural tendency is for the cows to refuse to leave the calves, it would have to be a supernatural impulse to override the cow's maternal instincts. Plus, if the cows just wandered around, the trouble wasn't from Israel's God. But if the cows head straight into Israelite territory, then it confirms Yehovah was the One hacking on the Philistines (6:9). Well, the cows go straight to Beth-Shemesh in Israelite territory, mooing for their calves, with the Philistine leaders walking behind to bear witness. Case closed.

All this happened during the wheat harvest (May-June). Imagine the astonishment of the Beth-Shemesh-ites (there's a mouthful!) when God's holy Ark pulls into view. The local Levites lift off the Ark (proper procedure), and the people offer sacrifices in thanksgiving

to the Lord. The now-satisfied Philistine leaders head home (6:16). But some of the people of Beth-Shemesh soon commit a no-no. They lift the Ark's lid to see what was inside (improper procedure), and Yehovah strikes down seventy people for their unholy infraction. Again, it's the "treating the Lord's stuff with disrespect" thing. It wasn't just a gold-plated box. It was one of Yehovah's most holy objects. The Ark was to remain in the ultra-sanctified Holy of Holies, seen only once per year by the High Priest and transported by only a few designated holy priests.

So now that the people of Beth-Shemesh are deathly afraid (as the Philistines now were). What are they to do with the Ark? Idea! Let's send it to Kiriath-Jearim and let the local Levites take care of it there! Chapter seven opens with the Ark's transport to Abinadab house and his son as the Ark's consecrated supervisor (7:1). The Ark remained there for *twenty years* because the people weren't ready to seek the Lord as their one and only God. They were still wrapped up in their syncretistic practices, blending worship of Yehovah with pagan worship. So, the Lord leaves them alone in their idolatry and under Philistine oppression (nothing like a bit of oppression to stoke revival fires, huh?). Only when they start longing for the Lord that Samuel calls them to quit with the divided heart thing (7:3). When the people respond properly, i.e., with heartfelt repentance, Samuel sets the day for a revival service. And what a service it was!

The people gather to fast and pray in repentance. The Philistines hear of it, and they figure the Israelites are getting uppity again now that they have the Ark, so the Philistine army assembles to put down what they see as a budding rebellion. But right in the middle of the Philistines' attack, Yehovah causes an unearthly racket that scares the dickens out of the Philistines (7:10). They turn tail and run off with the Israelite warriors in hot pursuit, striking their oppressors down as they run away. The battle goes so well that Israel takes the Philistine-held towns from Ekron to Gath and even more of the surrounding territory. And the Lord subdues the Philistine oppressors from then on throughout Samuel's lifetime (7:13). Yehovah also causes peace to break out between the Israelites and the Amorites.

Chapter 8 is the beginning of a new phase of Israelite history – the monarchy. The Lord has given His people peace, but the Israelites grow restless. Samuel was a great prophet and judge, but sadly his sons turned out just as bad as Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, "his sons did not walk in his ways – they turned toward dishonest profit, took bribes, and perverted justice" (8:3). Don't let anyone tell you that being a good, godly parent guarantees good, godly children. Samuel's sons are so bad the entire nation isn't looking forward to the day Samuel dies, and the lads take over from their esteemed father (8:5). The peoples' solution? Please give us a king, Samuel!

Was it ever the Lord's intention to give the Israelites a king? Perhaps, if you take all of the Bible into perspective. Remember that the kingship and priesthood (ruler and spiritual leader) initially rested on the father of each family early on (Adam, Noah, Abraham, and the Patriarchs). The father's firstborn son was the next king-priest in training to fill the family role when dad died. The priesthood passed from the firstborns to the Levites at the Golden Calf episode (Numbers 3:12) with the High Priest as the head of the Levitical priesthood. The firstborn leadership role was maintained for individual families, but a body of leaders – elders and judges – was created by God to help Moses with national issues (Exodus 18:21-22 and Numbers 11:16-17). When Jesus returns, He will be His Father's Firstborn Son and Israel's King and High Priest, wrapping all three roles into one.

But for now, the head of Israel's elders will be a soon-to-be-anointed king. Since this is a significant change to Israel's government, Samuel takes their request to the Lord. I find what the Lord says to Samuel fascinating. It seems Samuel was feeling rejected by the peoples' request. It would also be hard to have the people reject your sons and know they're right. But what does Yehovah tell him? "They have not rejected you; they have rejected me as their king. They are doing the same thing to you that they have done to me, since the day I brought them out of Egypt until this day, abandoning me and worshiping other gods" (8:7-8).

The Lord knew this day would come because He had already warned the people when they were in the desert. He gave them parameters to follow when they asked Him for a human king, the first being it must be a man God chooses" (Deuteronomy 17:14-15). Now the Lord warns them about what they're asking. Their king will demand their sons for war and farming and their daughters for royal servitude. Their king will take the best of their land to provide for his staff. Eventually, they will find themselves laboring for their king rather than serving their God. And, "when that day comes, you will cry out because of the king you've chosen for yourselves, but the Lord won't answer you on that day" (8:18).

But the Israelites don't listen. Rather than being distinct from the world, they want to be just like the nations around them. So, Samuel gets to work to find them the king after their own hearts.

INSIGHT

Even the strongest Christian finds themselves in periods of spiritual laxness. It's way too easy for the things of this world to creep into our lives and take their place alongside the

Lord. We even push God to the side or take Him for granted or use Him as our “lucky rabbit’s foot” or last-minute insurance policy just in case. But Jesus will have none of that.

As a friend of mine likes to say, “Either Jesus is the Lord of all or He’s not Lord at all.” And if it takes the Lord “leaving us in a dry place” for a season to build a longing in us for His nearness and spiritual vitality, so be it. There are ways we can stoke our spiritual fire when we find ourselves in that lonely place longing for God. Put away the distractions and the things that take our time, talent, treasure, and efforts from Jesus. Focus on Him by reading and listening. Remember His great promise, “You will seek me and find me *when you search for me with all your heart*” (Jeremiah 29:13). The heart is the heart of the matter. Let us attend to the things that draw our attention away from the Lord. Our lives are too short not to enjoy as much time with the Lord as possible to His glory and for the sake of those around us.

March 16 : Scriptures 1 Samuel 9-12

SUMMARY

Our reading begins with a man looking for donkeys and a nation looking for a king. We're introduced to Israel's first king, Saul. He's described as "an impressive young man. There was no one more impressive among the Israelites than he. He stood a head taller than anyone else" (9:2). It's not surprising that Saul was looked upon as king material, even though the Lord pointed him out to Samuel. Many people look up to tall leaders (yes, pun intended). People tend to idolize those who are stronger, bigger, faster, more intelligent, or quick-witted than the average person. Those outstanding qualities make a person, well, stand out. Such was the case with Saul.

But this presents an interesting juxtaposition. Saul is an outstanding man from the smallest, most notorious tribe of his day, Benjamin. It wasn't too long ago that the Benjaminites were nearly wiped out due to Gibeah's outrageous sin and the tribe's defense of the offenders (Judges 19-20), remember? By the way, we'll soon find out that Saul's hometown was the infamous Gibeah (10:26), where the Sodom and Gomorrah-esque horrible assault took place!

So here we have an impressive person by outward standards, but the circumstances surrounding his family and home were looked down upon by the rest of the Israelite tribes. How do you imagine such a man would act if called upon to be king? Would he be a big man who was small in his own eyes? How would that affect his decision-making ability or dedication to God's authority? Saul has the outward stature, but does he have the inward heart for the Lord's service as his nation's king?

Chapter 9 describes how Saul and Samuel connect. While Saul might have thought that meeting Samuel was accidental, we see Yehovah carefully plans it. Nothing in this meeting is by accident. Samuel has already scheduled the feast, their meeting, the location, the food, and everything in preparation for Saul's arrival (9:14-16, 23-24). The Lord not only tells Samuel in advance of Saul's arrival but points Samuel to Saul himself (9:17). Samuel's response shouldn't surprise us because Samuel had excellent spiritual hearing as Yehovah's premier prophet whose words always came to pass.

The key to this chapter is Samuel and Saul's exchange, "'And who does all Israel desire but you and all your father's family?'" (9:20). What's going on here?

God confirmed Samuel as Seer by revealing the donkeys' condition to Saul. "You've been wanting donkeys," says Samuel, but continues, "and Israel has been wanting you." Israel

desires to have a king, and according to Samuel, the call to kingship has fallen on Saul. Saul “gets” what Samuel says – that Israel is looking to Saul and his family for leadership. How do we know Saul understands this? By Saul’s objection, “Saul responded, ‘Am I not a Benjamite from the smallest of Israel’s tribes and isn’t my clan the least important of all the clans of the Benjaminite tribe? So why have you said something like this to me?’” (9:21). Evidently, Saul is a big man with a big inferiority complex based on his family, tribal, and hometown background. We can only guess that he was wrestling with insecurity, shame, and feeling the need to prove his self-worth, among other things.

But it doesn’t matter. Saul is what the people desire – a king – and a tall, dark, and handsome impressive one at that! After the feast, Samuel, Saul, and Saul’s servant return to Samuel’s home, where the Seer and the future king have a little conversation on the flat rooftop in the cool of the evening. As we’ll find out soon, this episode takes place in early summer when it gets rather hot and dry in the land of Israel. Everyone retires, and the following day, Saul and his servant prepare to go home.

Chapter 10 is the big reveal. Samuel sends the servant ahead while Saul stays with him. Samuel anoints Saul with oil and prophesies various events to confirm the Lord’s selection of Saul as king (10:1). So, before we go further, let’s talk about this anointing thing because we see it a lot in scripture.

Anointing with oil is a physical sign of a spiritual event. In this case, anointing a person with oil “marks them” as Yehovah’s person in response to His call, someone upon whom God has placed His Spirit. The placing of God’s Spirit on a person enabled them to do the Lord’s work. Samson’s strength came from the Lord, not from himself. Samuel’s ability to hear God accurately, Saul’s ability to lead and fight, and the ability for Israel’s elders to lead all came from the presence of God’s Spirit with His called and commissioned people. Having the Lord’s anointing made a person Yehovah’s representative. That’s why we’ll see David so hesitant about how he deals in the future with Saul’s temper and accusations. Harming the Lord’s anointed was, in essence, attacking Yehovah even if his representative was off track. But one thing to keep in mind is this; anointing is *essential*, but it isn’t *everything*. Character is just as important. Saul must do what he can to prepare himself to be king, even if it is sudden. He should take heart because it wasn’t up to him alone. After all, the Lord was with him.

Once Saul is anointed, he departs, and all the things Samuel prophesied would happen come to pass. First, there was confirmation (10:2-4) and then Saul’s transformation (10:5-6). When Saul arrives home, he chooses not to reveal to his father all that Samuel said

(10:16) or all that happened to him. I can't imagine how Saul's father would have reacted had he known.

God has anointed Saul. Now Samuel reveals Saul to Israel as their God-appointed king. Samuel stages the selection ceremony at Mizpah. While it's a joyous occasion for Israel since they get their king, it's also a downer because it comes with the Lord's rebuke. Samuel begins by telling the Israelites all their supreme King has done for them by repeatedly delivering them from their enemies (10:18). "But no, you want a human king rather than a divine, undefeatable, immortal, King. So, here's your king!" The selection process comes down to Saul, but the big man is nowhere to be seen. I love that the Lord rats out the timid Saul, "The Lord replied, 'There he is, hidden among the supplies.'" Again, Saul may be a big man, but he has some big insecurities. Samuel records the king's rights and sends everyone home. But not everyone is pleased with their new king, who had to be drawn out of hiding. Saul's lack of confidence fails to inspire some wicked men in attendance.

Chapter 11 is Saul's first test as Israel's new king. Nahash, the Ammonite (east of the Jordan), moves north to capture the town of Jabesh-Gilead (11:1). This town was in Manasseh's territory about one-third of the way south between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. Yes, it would be a good time to look at your Bible maps again. Under threat of abuse and incapacitation (all Jabesh-Gileadites losing a right eye), the townsfolk beg for a treaty or time to find a champion. Nahash must feel pretty confident because he allows this one concession.

When Saul hears of the attack, the Spirit rushes upon him powerfully (11:6). The sense of "rushes" is of hurricane-force winds striking him! Saul springs into action. He cuts up an ox and sends a threatening call to arms telegram throughout the nation. Three hundred and thirty thousand warriors show up for the fight (11:8). Saul attacks at dawn, and the battle is such a rout, there are Ammonite survivors, but they're so scattered they can't find two of them together (11:11). Now that's scattering!

Saul has won the Peoples' Choice Award! So much so the public is ready to kill those wicked people who rejected Saul at his introduction party. But Saul steps up and graciously puts a stop to it. Gee, maybe he's growing into kingship not just militarily but diplomatically?

And now comes the best moment of Saul's inauguration. He's been chosen and proven in battle. Now it's time for Samuel to step back as Israel's final Judge in deference to Israel's first King. This event is the official transition from Judges to Kings. Samuel uses

the moment to reaffirm Saul's kingship. Saul's first call to kingship was a private anointing. At Saul's second call, most, not all, of the people accepted Saul based on Samuel's word. This third time, everyone responded because they had seen Saul's anointing in action.

Samuel exonerates himself (showed himself free from blame), recalls his faithfulness to Yehovah, and sets an example for Saul to follow. He asked Israel for the vindication of his function as Judge and Prophet and asked them to confirm his blamelessness. Samuel had walked a transparent life before Israel since his youth. He calls forth any wrongs he may have committed. Finding none, the people declare Samuel innocent of accusation with God as their witness (12:4-5). Cleared of any unspoken case against him, Samuel now presents his case against the Israelites. As Israel's Judge, he declares their sin and the Lord's righteousness (12:6). Despite *all* the Lord their King has done for them, they reject Yehovah as their king and desire a human king to be like the nations around them.

Fine, Israel. Behold, your king! Here is the king *you* have desired, the one for which *you* asked. Saul is the king Yehovah knows you want, a man after *your* heart. Now that you have your king don't think the covenant terms have changed. If you fear the Lord, serve and obey Him (the original covenant terms). Don't rebel against His commands. If both you and your king follow the Lord – good! If not, God will work against you just as he did to your fathers (during the judges' time), and He will bring you and your king down.

Next, Judge Samuel confirms their guilt of rejecting Yehovah as their king, a thunderstorm in June (at the wheat harvest, 12:17). "So what?" you may ask. "Most people get thunderstorms in June in the U.S." Yes, but this isn't the United States. It's the land of Israel. Rainfall tapers off during May, and it gets scorching hot and dry during the summer. So yes, a thunderstorm in June would be very unusual and a sign from the Lord, especially when Samuel predicts it. Imagine, a miraculous storm that punctuates Saul's coronation!

The people are scared straight and confess their sin. The awesomeness of the thunderstorm had them crying out to Samuel to intercede on their behalf, and the very thing Samuel promises to keep doing (12:19, 23). Samuel offers them comforting words: "Okay, you goofed up. Just stay on track with the Lord, and everything will be fine" (12:20). Again, this is *the* central focus Samuel is always driving home, the focus on which the monarchy and Israel's very existence hangs. Samuel says, "I will not fail to pray. And You, don't fail to stay true to your God."

INSIGHT

God's unfailing faithfulness was shown by how He led Samuel and Saul to each other. Saul was minding his own business when everything began to happen. This pattern is typical of how God calls someone, as I've observed in many Christians' lives. Jesus usually doesn't call the person who is just sitting around, but the man or woman taking care of their everyday responsibilities.

This event brought a profound change to Israel as a nation. But regardless of the form of government they had – judges or kings – the people still had to live up to their primary responsibility to serve and obey the Lord. Even though the people would fail and their king would fail, God was the one who would never fail.

March 17 : Scriptures 1 Samuel 13-15

SUMMARY

Chapter 15 opens with a quick summary of Saul's reign, from start to conclusion. The ancient manuscripts differ on the number of years. But based on comparisons (and Acts 13:21), Saul likely became king at age 30 and reigned for 40-42 years. Here's a quick approximate timeline I found to help orient you:

- 1043 B.C. Samuel anoints Saul as king.
- 1035 David is born in Bethlehem.
- 1025 Samuel goes to Bethlehem to anoint David as Israel's future king after Saul's disobedience and subsequent rejection by the Lord.
- 1023 David serves as a musician in Saul's court.
- 1020 David takes down Goliath.
- 1010 David becomes the commander of Saul's army.
- 1008 David flees from Saul, grabs Goliath's sword in Nob, runs to Philistine territory, feigning madness.
- 1000 Samuel dies. Saul dies in battle.
- 993 David is anointed king over Judah. Israel's civil war occurs. David is crowned king over all Israel.
- 961 David dies, and the kingship passes to his son, Solomon. (Source: totallyhistory.com/biblical-history/king-david)

I hope that helps. The Bible covers such extensive historical ground it's good to have benchmarks in time and location to orient us as we read. Okay, now on with our reading.

In chapter 13, Saul is "pressure tested" to check his heart condition. As this account unfolds, we must remember that Israel is still under Philistine oppression. Samson stirred the pot, and the Lord used him to start the conflict. But Israel has proven too timid to confront the scary army with its iron chariots and giants.

Saul's son, Jonathan, steps up and attacks the Philistine garrison in Saul's hometown of Gibeah (13:3). Well, that got the Philistines' attention, and the battle is on! Saul calls in the Israelite army, but it only took one look at the Philistines' "three thousand chariots, six thousand horsemen, and troops as numerous as the sand on the seashore" to take the wind out of the Israelite army's sails (13:6). Yup. Like scared little rabbits, the Israelites ran and hid. Some even ran east and crossed the Jordan River. (Nope. ON second thought, they weren't rabbits. They were chickens!)

The prophet Samuel had set a time for a sacrifice to the Lord to ask for His help. According to 13:8, Saul had received word from Samuel to wait seven days until he showed up to make the sacrifice. But as the appointment approaches, Saul's men begin to desert him. Understandably, this would unnerve any king, so Saul "feels compelled" to offer the sacrifice in disobedience to Samuel's instructions. But, it's not up to the king to offer the sacrifice. That was Samuel's job. So, Saul usurps Samuel's role as prophet and priest.

Oops! Just as Saul is lighting the fire, Samuel shows up. When asked to explain himself, Saul gives all sorts of reasons to excuse his disobedience; it was the *army's* fault for deserting me, and it was *your* fault for showing up late. Yada-yada-yada. (What about *your* fault, Saul?) "So I forced myself to offer the burnt offering" (13:12). Really? You just *had* to disobey because your fear was more important than obeying God? Saul's heart, his desire to allay his fear, and his desire for protection pushed him to disobey and nothing else. King Saul fails a major test.

Why is this incident so critical? Because Israel's king needed to obey Yehovah completely. The Lord was Israel's ultimate authority, not a human king. And the king was not above the prophet or High Priest, either. This plurality of leadership is what made Israel's government strong. But it's in human nature to strive beyond the boundaries the Lord sets for us so we can achieve our desires. This incident reveals that Saul's heart is not set on the Lord but on himself.

What is the consequence of Saul's action? The kingship will not continue in his family line within the tribe of Benjamin (13:13). Instead, the Lord has already begun to tap Saul's replacement when the king's reign is over.

The chapter ends with no change in the siege status. The Philistines are still in control, they're sending out raiding parties to terrorize the Israelites, and the Philistines have banned all Israelites blacksmiths (total disarmament). Only Saul and Jonathan have swords.

With that astounding amount of armament (sarcasm intended), Jonathan and his armor-bearer decide to launch their campaign against the Philistines. Just the two of them. You have to admire Jonathan's *chutzpah* (Yiddish for "audacity")! So here's the scenario. Saul, his troops, and the High Priest (Ahijah) are camped outside Gibeah. Ahitub was in the former High Priest Eli's family line for the record. His father was Phinehas, who was so wicked the Lord killed him. Ahitub's brother was Ichabod, Phinehas' son. I just wanted to point that out.

Jonathan sneaks off, and none of the troops notice he's missing (14:3). Since Jonathan knows the area and where the Philistines are encamped, he decides on a power play. They'll cross the chasm between them and the Philistines but only go far enough for the enemy to see them. Then Jonathan "puts out a fleece," a condition to help him know the Lord's will (like Gideon did in the book of Judges). If the Philistines respond one way, Jonathan and his servant run like crazy. But if the enemy responds another way, the intrepid duo knows the Lord will hand the enemy over to them. Great plan, right?

Well, the Philistine spotters say the stupidest thing they could say in their very short lives, "Come on up, and we'll teach you a lesson!" (14:13). It was Jonathan and his armor-bearer who were the teachers that day. They strike down about twenty Philistines in a half-acre plot of land. *And all heaven breaks loose!* Terror hits all the Philistine soldiers. The ground shakes, and the Lord amps up their fright. Saul and his troops look up to see the Philistines scattering in panic. I get this delightful movie in my head as I read this.

Saul (it's funnier with a British accent): "Say, do you see what's going on over there? And what's with this earthquake?"

Soldier: "Dunno, my lord."

Saul: "Well, check the rolls. See if any of our boys are over there stirring things up and making a hash of it."

Soldier: "Jonathan and his armor-bearer aren't here, my lord."

Saul: "Drat. Bring the High Priest and the Ark. Maybe the Lord will tell us what to do as the Philistines are panicking?"

Ahitub: (starts calling on the Lord and prepping a sacrifice.)

Saul (waving him off): "Forget that. To the battle, men! Uh, wait (*looking through ancient Israelite binoculars*), they seem to be fighting each other. What the deuces?"

Thanks, I just thought I'd have a little fun with that.

Anyway, the Philistines are defeated and start running home with the Israelite army tailing them, striking as many Philistines down as they can. Even though the Israelites are exhausted and hungry, Saul rashly puts them under oath not to eat until the job's done (14:24).

The battle extends into the forest. The famished men find honey on the ground but refuse to eat it because who wants to tick off the king? No one. But then there's Johnathan. Since he didn't hear about the oath (and curse), he went ahead and ate, getting fresh energy from the sugar rush! He's warned about his dad's oath but blows it off as foolish because they could have really put the hurt on the Philistines if the soldiers were refreshed.

After the battle, the famished soldiers return and tear into their plunder of animals. Sadly, they don't even cook the meat they're so hungry (14:32-33). Saul knows enough of the Torah that it forbids eating blood (Deuteronomy 12:15-24), *so he builds an altar upon which to sacrifice the animals*. You guessed it. That wasn't his job. That's something the Levites are to do, "Then Saul built an altar to the Lord; *it was the first time he had built an altar to the Lord*" (14:35). The writer wouldn't have mentioned it if this were not a violation.

Saul then seeks the Lord, but the Lord doesn't answer him. Why? There's been a violation of Saul's oath, foolish as it was. The troops know who it was but don't say when Saul seeks out the perp. Eventually, the Lord reveals that it was Jonathan who broke the oath. But is he responsible since he didn't know about it? Saul demands Jonathan's death without considering that his oath was foolish or that Jonathan was the day's hero. It's was a violation of *Saul's* command with no extenuating circumstances. Thankfully, the troops prevail and convince Saul to wave Jonathan's sentence (14:45-46). But because Saul didn't let his troops eat, they didn't have the vitality to strike even harder at their enemies.

The summary of chapter 14 chronicles Saul's reign, battles, and family offspring. Though seemingly trivial, it's important because it shows that Saul was an effective king despite his faults. The family members and associates listed will play an essential role in future chapters. And we're told that Saul recognizes talent. Hence, the set up for David to be taken into Saul's service when the time comes.

But first, we come to the reason the Lord selects David. It's because of this incident in chapter 15. Samuel gives King Saul the Lord's clear command, "Go and attack the Amalekites and *completely destroy* everything they have. Do not spare them. Kill men and women, infants and nursing babies, oxen and sheep, camels and donkeys" (15:3). You can't get more clear than that. Please understand that the Amorites were under Yehovah's Canaanite ban, which meant utter destruction because they sinned against Him. None of the surrounding nations were under this ban, only the Canaanite tribes. So, Saul gets to work. He and his army march south from central Israel to the desert (Negev) in the south where the Amalekites live. Saul attacks the Amalekites and chases them west toward Egypt. He smites them terribly and wins the battle.

But he didn't complete the assignment as stated. "He captured King Agag of Amalek alive (*disobeyed*), but he completely destroyed all the rest of the people with the sword (*obeyed*). Saul and the troops spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, goats, cattle, and choice animals, as well as the young rams and the best of everything else. They were not willing to destroy them (*disobeyed*), but they did destroy all the worthless and unwanted things (*obeyed*)" (15:8-9). Is partial obedience complete obedience? Nope.

Of course, Samuel hears of it *from the Lord*. Saul has crossed the line and shown his inability to be the Lord's obedient king. Yehovah says, "I regret that I made Saul king, for *he has turned away from following me* (heart attitude leading to turning away) and *has not carried out my instructions* (the evidence of Saul's defection)" (15:11). His heart's desires have again moved King Saul (sparing King Agag – pride, boasting over his defeat – and saving the best plunder – to feed his pride and perhaps enrich himself?). Saul's revealed disobedience angers and distresses Samuel so much the prophet cries to the Lord all night.

Perhaps the elderly Samuel sees the kingship collapsing? How can he find another person who will have a heart after God that King Saul didn't have? For those of you who are parents of children who have turned from the Lord, it's very easy to identify with Samuel in this chapter as his hopes crash to the ground.

The following day, Samuel goes to confront Saul only to find the king has gone off the rails with pride. With King Agag and plunder in tow, King Saul followed the main highway from Egypt's borders and traveled north to Carmel (time to look at the Bible map – on the western end of the fertile Jezreel valley in central Israel) and set up a monument to himself. Then Saul turned east and returned to Gikal.

When Samuel finally catches up with Saul, the triumphant, self-satisfied king greets him heartily, "May the Lord bless you. I have carried out the Lord's instructions" (15:13). But Samuel calls his attention to the loot that was supposed to be slaughtered, not retained. What's Saul's justification for his disobedience? "The troops brought them from the Amalekites and spared the best sheep, goats, and cattle to offer a sacrifice to the Lord your God, but the rest we destroyed" (15:15). After raising four children, I recall how I told my kids not to eat cookies without permission and then caught them with their hands in the cookie jar. "I obeyed. This cookie wasn't for me. I was getting this for you," they would say. Uh-huh. Right. Well, Samuel's not buying Saul's excuse either.

Samuel wallops Saul with his words, "God took you from *nothing* and made you the *greatest* in Israel as king. He sent you on a mission with simple instructions. You had one job, Saul! Why did you not obey the Lord?" Saul again tries to justify himself, "But I did obey the Lord!" he answered. "I went on the mission the Lord gave me – (*Up to this point Saul was obedient. Now he blends his disobedience with obedience to try to negate his sin.*) – I brought back King Agag of Amalek (*disobeyed*), and I completely destroyed the Amalekites (*obeyed, but not. King Agag, remember?*). The troops took sheep, goats, and cattle from the plunder – the best of what was set apart for destruction (*disobeyed, now he*

blames his disobedience on his troops) —to sacrifice to the Lord your God at Gilgal (but I was getting the cookie for you, so it's not my fault)" (15:20-21).

Saul's response is telling, "to sacrifice to the Lord *your* God." This short statement says everything. Yehovah is Samuel's God, but is He Saul's God? Of course. But when we deliberately disobey the Lord's clear word, we're putting ourselves and our will above God.

And now the hammer falls. "Forget the sacrifices, Saul. Sacrifices are worthless compared to obedience. Without obedience, sacrifices are nothing. In fact, rebellion and defiance are as bad as idolatry because they come from turning away from God. Saul, you're done as Israel's lasting king."

Too late, Saul confesses and finally tells the truth. "I disobeyed because of my fear of the people." Obviously, Saul feared man more than God. Since that's the case, God now strips him of his kingship. Yehovah's plan is now in motion to call, develop, and install Israel's next king. It won't be immediate, but it's inevitable. As Samuel walks away, Saul reaches out to stop him because he wants Samuel to stay with him to bolster his kingship. Saul grabs the corner of Samuel's garment where the God-ordained fringes are, and the corner tears away. Samuel affirms that as a prophetic sign that Saul's kingship is given to another.

Interestingly, the fringes on a garment are there to remind the wearer of the Lord's word and obey it at all times (Numbers 15:37-41). Saul is rejected as king because he disobeyed God's word, and this is what we call irony.

Samuel kills Amalekite King Agag and turns away from King Saul. The next time Saul sees Samuel, it will not bode well for him. On a final note, many Jews wish Saul had utterly wiped out the Amalekites when he had the chance. Why? Because a descendant of Agag will rise to threaten the entire Jewish people living in the Persian empire centuries later. But that's another story.

INSIGHT

Saul had great promise and was wonderfully equipped. He had physical strength, was attractive to people, and the Lord's Holy Spirit was upon him and empowering him. Given all that, what was the deciding factor regarding Saul's failure? Perhaps it was his unwillingness to devote himself to God entirely? This chapter clearly shows Saul's problem. He was to give everything to God, yet he held some of himself back. When

confronted, he falsely claimed that this was for spiritual purposes when it was actually for selfish purposes. How often do we live life the same way?

Where is your heart right now? Are you a man or a woman after God's heart, or are you holding some of yourself back for personal reasons? Be careful! Those reasons could cause you to turn away from Him when you come under pressure.

"Men of genius are admired; men of wealth are envied; men of power are feared; but only men of character are trusted." ~Unknown

March 18 : Scriptures 1 Samuel 16-18

SUMMARY

We begin our reading with Samuel finding Saul's successor. Samuel felt sorrow *for* Saul, but God felt sorrow *about* Saul. God reproved Samuel's mourning since God had rejected Saul, "The Lord said to Samuel, 'How long are you going to mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and go. I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem because I have selected for myself a king from his sons'" (16:1). The Lord has scanned Israel, and His choice has fallen to one of Jesse of Bethlehem's sons. That's all Samuel has to go on. So, Samuel takes the flask of anointing oil to show the Lord's choice and illustrate the Holy Spirit's coming to reside on the chosen one.

What is Samuel's fear about venturing forth to anoint a new king? Because the road to Bethlehem from Ramah passes through Gibeah of Saul. Samuel's presence would most certainly catch Saul's attention, especially after their falling out. An act of anointing another king would be regarded as treason, even if Samuel is doing Yehovah's bidding. How does the Lord give Samuel cover without lying? By making Samuel's mission a time of sacrifice, the type that Samuel does throughout Israel in various locations. The anointing would happen during the time of sacrifice. "Nothing to see here. Move along, citizen."

Since Samuel is on a need-to-know-basis, he's clueless about which of Jesse's sons the Lord has chosen. Samuel's guess is it would be the firstborn son who apparently had a kingly stature and appearance. But the Lord waves Eliab off. Samuel made his assumption by using his physical sight, but the Lord has a different measure of the future king, "But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or his stature because I have rejected him. Humans do not see what the Lord sees, for humans see what is visible, but the Lord sees the heart" (16:7).

After going through all of Jesse's sons that were present and not finding the Lord's choice, Samuel asks if Jesse has any more sons. "Oh, yeah. But the little guy is the youngest, and he gets saddled with shepherd duty." Samuel sends for him, and David isn't a bad-looking kid either. The crucial thing is the Lord tells Samuel directly this young lad is his choice, and he is to anoint him (16:12-13).

Meanwhile, back with King Saul, there's trouble brewing. Now that the Lord has lifted His Spirit from Saul, an evil spirit sent by the Lord attacks the king (16:14). This spirit torments Saul greatly! The evil spirit is part of the Lord's punishment on Saul for his disobedience. Saul experiences depression, violence, jealousy, envy, and hatred from this

point on in his life. This Spirit-less state will even affect his relationship with his son Jonathan. David's rising popularity will only intensify the torment. Saul's torment is so bad that even those around him see it. His servants' suggested solution is music. They must have known the phrase, "Music soothes the savage beast." Wherever will they find such a skilled musician to soothe Saul? "One of the young men answered, 'I have seen a son of Jesse of Bethlehem who knows how to play the lyre. He is also a valiant man, a warrior, eloquent, handsome, and the Lord is with him'" (16:18). Saul sends for David and is so pleased he asks Jesse to let David remain in his court. David is not only anointed, but now the Lord has positioned him for further teaching and training. Much of what David will learn is what to do and not do as king, although he doesn't know that yet.

Chapter 17 of 1 Samuel is very familiar to many, even non-Christians. It's the account of David and Goliath. Goliath was one bad guy! He's one of the giants from the line of giants inhabiting Canaan when Israel first tried to take the land under Moses' supervision. He's described as "nine feet, nine inches tall and wore a bronze helmet and bronze scale armor that weighed one hundred twenty-five pounds. There was bronze armor on his shins, and a bronze javelin was slung between his shoulders. His spear shaft was like a weaver's beam, and the iron point of his spear weighed fifteen pounds. In addition, a shield-bearer was walking in front of him (as added protection)" (17:4-7). Yes, very intimidating.

Israel's Philistine oppressors now march against Israel a little while after the Jonathan and armor-bearer battle. This time they bring Goliath, the living tank. He probably clanked when he walked, too. So here's the scenario. Both sides set up battle lines and yell battle cries at each other. The purpose is for one side to intimidate the other side and weaken their resolve before an assault. But Goliath and the Philistines decide not to lose warriors needlessly. They propose the ol' "send in your champion" strategy. Whichever champion wins, the other side surrenders. This proposition is understandable because Saul stands a good head taller than all the other Israelite warriors. "Hey, Israel! You send your big guy up against our big guy, and we'll see what happens." But Goliath's size completely demoralizes Saul and the Israelites, "When Saul and all Israel heard these words from the Philistine, they lost their courage and were terrified" (17:11). So, they're at a stalemate.

By this time, David's three older brothers have joined the army. David shows up with supplies for his brothers as the battle lines are set up. When Goliath steps out, *everybody freaks out!* When he starts bellowing, the Israelites are terrified, except for David. Israelite warrior clue David in as to what was going on with Monster Man and David says, "What will be done for the man who kills that Philistine and removes this disgrace from Israel?"

Just who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" (17:26). The descriptor "uncircumcised Philistine" is an insult like, "Who is this rank pagan that dares to defy the Living God?" Obviously, it's not the size of the dog but the fight in him that matters.

David's older brother, in true sibling fashion, assumes David is just there for the show, but David is intrigued. I think the Holy Spirit was stirring him up for a fight. When Saul catches wind of someone with a positive attitude, he summons David, and David volunteers for giant-slaying duty. But why would David possibly think he could take down a huge man? Because as David explains, "Your servant has been tending his father's sheep. Whenever a lion or a bear came and carried off a lamb from the flock, I went after it, struck it down, and rescued the lamb from its mouth. If it reared up against me, I would grab it by its fur, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed lions and bears; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, for 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" (17:34-37). Well, alrighty then.

Saul outfits David with his armor (likely the best in the camp), but David can't function. It's some fantastic foreshadowing of Saul's kingship transferring to David in the future, but David won't do it in Saul's way. David will be king the Lord's way and under the Lord's anointing. David goes with what he knows – dressed as a shepherd with his defensive weapon, a staff, and his offensive weapon, a sling. He grabbed five stones from a nearby brook then confidently strides toward Goliath.

When they meet, Goliath trash-talks David, and David trashes him back, "You come against me with a sword, spear, and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord of Armies, the God of the ranks of Israel—you have defied him. Today, the Lord will hand you over to me. Today, I'll strike you down, remove your head, and give the corpses of the Philistine camp to the birds of the sky and the wild creatures of the earth. Then all the world will know that Israel has a God, and this whole assembly will know that it is not by sword or by spear that the Lord saves, for the battle is the Lord's. He will hand you over to us" (17:45-47). A famous radio commentator often said, "It ain't bragging if you can do it!" And David does it. He runs *toward* the giant and rockets a stone at the big guy's forehead. You have to understand this about slings. Those sling stones can zip around 90 miles per hour at their target. The well-placed stone did the trick. David drops Goliath, then kills Goliath by decapitation with his own sword (Oh! How embarrassing!). The Philistines turn tail, the Israelites pursue, Saul is impressed, and David gets a head in his career (17:50-58). (Yes, I meant to write that. Not sorry. I'll see my way out.)

By the way, if you can find it online, look for the song "David and Goliath" by the remarkable vocal group, Take 6. It's delightful!

David now becomes fast friends with King Saul's son, Jonathan (18:1). Chapter 18 covers their growing friendship and Saul's growing paranoia. David and Jonathan make a covenant with one another, which is more than a friendship. It's a deep commitment to maintaining their friendship through thick and thin. You can tell because it involves an exchange of clothing to symbolize "what's mine is yours" (18:3-4).

David and Jonathan's covenant friendship are good because things sour quickly between Saul and David. During the victory parade after defeating the Philistines (and Goliath), people praise David more than Saul, which irks Saul. And so sprout the seeds of jealousy.

The very next day, the evil spirit hits King Saul, and as David is ministering in music, Saul throws his spear at David in a rage, but the Lord's anointed one escapes. Why is Saul jealous of David? The text tells us it's because the Spirit left Saul and went to David. We're not told if Saul knew that or not. Could the evil spirit on Saul have seen the Holy Spirit on David and moved to attack its enemy to get the Holy Spirit away from it? We're not sure.

Since David is too spry to pin to the wall, King Saul moves to another plan to eliminate his competition. King Saul makes David commander of a thousand troops. Perhaps warfare will kill David. Nope. David's success only made him more popular.

Well, perhaps the lure of marriage would work to ensure David wouldn't move against him. But the only way to marry the king's daughter would be more battlefield experience. There's a method to Saul's madness. Why should he kill David when the Philistines could do it for him (18:17)? But David balks at marrying Saul's oldest daughter because he doesn't feel worthy. However, Michal's love for David presents Saul's his golden opportunity. Therefore, Saul demands a – unique – bride price for Michal's hand in marriage, one hundred Philistine foreskins (18:25) to motivate David into battle. Why foreskins? Because David and his entourage would have to fight and kill at least one hundred Philistine soldiers, and the chances are David would die. However, David, the anointed over-achiever that he is, takes his men and kills 200 Philistines! Now that David has paid the bride price *and* his daughter is smitten with the handsome young soldier on his way up the military ladder, the situation is more threatening. "Saul realized that the Lord was with David and that his daughter Michal loved him, and he became even more afraid of David. As a result, Saul was David's enemy from then on" (18:28). While David rises in experience, esteem, and popularity, Saul is racking up losses; his reputation in the

Goliath affair, his esteem vs. David's achievements, and his daughter. Now David's an even more significant threat to his reign.

INSIGHT

Here are some quick and fast insights drawn from the Goliath account. 1) Walk faithfully with God. Expect Him to defend you and humble the enemy. Those who threaten to attack you can be easily exposed and handled by the Lord. 2) Our seemingly gigantic circumstances often mock our trust in God. Stand firm in your faith! 3) God is big enough to direct you knowingly or unknowingly along your life path. God uses your past as training for your future. And 4) It's Mr. Tall vs. Tall Saul, but both fall. David is bigger than the giant in his heart. Goliath is self-confident, but David is God-confident, confident in God's capacity to work in him and through his abilities.

March 19 : Scriptures 1 Samuel 19-22

SUMMARY

From impetuous murder by his hand to intentional murder by another's hand to deliberate murder by his hand, Saul is going from bad to worse. Chapter 19 begins with an outright order from Saul to Jonathan and all his servants to kill David. Why? Because Saul knows Jonathan can get close to David. The king is asking Jonathan to betray his covenant friend. But Jonathan comes up with a plan to see if he can dissuade his father.

With David in a covert place nearby, Jonathan sounds out his father. His persuasion works. King Saul swears with an oath that he won't harm David, and with that, David returns to Saul's court (19:6-7). But David's overwhelming success sparks more jealousy (19:8). Once again, we see David in Saul's presence, attempting to soothe Saul's torment with music. Saul's repeat attempt on David's life fails, and David flees home. His wife, Michal, discovers her father's plot to kill her husband in the morning. She helps David escape then puts a dummy in the bed to create a diversion to delay her father's agents. It works. David makes his escape, and with a head start, he flees to the safest place he knows – where the elderly Samuel is. He not only seeks refuge but probably counsel from the Lord's primary representative.

Samuel escorts David to Naioth, where a company of prophets lived. Placing David among the prophets is a profound move! David and Samuel aren't trusting in physical protection but the Lord's might. As in the Goliath incident, David relies on the Lord's offense and defense against an enemy – the hallmark of his life.

God's presence via His Holy Spirit is so strong with Samuel and his team of prophets that it flattens three groups of Saul's messengers. Yehovah doesn't kill the messengers. He just "distracts" them. The Lord defends Samuel and David by "zapping" the assassins with the Spirit, similar to what happened to the Roman soldiers when they attempted to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (John 18:3-6). With three groups of emissaries down, Saul has finally had enough! "If ya want something done, do it yerself!" When he reaches Samuel, the Spirit also blasts Saul, and the king is incapacitated for a whole day.

Chapter 20 opens with Saul out of action. This episode is the beginning of David's Exile as he runs from King Saul. The events in chapters 20-31 show the Lord shaping the man after His own heart in the "desert of affliction" and the "school of hard knocks." Note how David's good and bad traits are brought to the surface and dealt with by the Lord.

With Saul indisposed, this gives David enough time to return to Jonathan at Gibeah. Once there, the two cook up a plan to see if there's any hope of salvaging David's place with Saul. David plans not to attend the New Moon feast with Saul and his family, just to be safe. The excuse is David will celebrate the new month's feast (New Moon) with his clan. The first night David is away won't be unusual to Saul. But if David is gone for the second night (after the new moon celebration), there's no reason to explain it other than David is avoiding the king. How Saul reacts will determine how much danger David is in (20:7, 10).

The two men set up a signal to let David know Saul is committed to murdering him. A near arrow says, "Come near," and a far arrow means, "Get the heck out of here!" David hides in the field, and Jonathan goes to the feast. True to plan, the "away for two days" excuse smokes out Saul's intention. The king erupts in anger, "You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don't I know that you are siding with Jesse's son to your own shame and to the disgrace of your mother? Every day Jesse's son lives on earth you and your kingship are not secure. Now send for him and bring him to me—he must die!" (20:30-31)! When Jonathan sticks up for David, his father tries to pin Jonathan to the wall with his spear. Well, that's settled. Jonathan runs to the field, relays the message to David, and David goes on the run. David's exile has now begun!

Chapter 21 begins David's flight from Saul's fury. His first stop is the town of Nob, where the Lord's Tabernacle is. When David shows up alone, the High Priest, Ahimelech, is suspicious (21:1). Perhaps word has spread of Saul's displeasure with his commander. David concocts a story about the king sending him out on a secret mission. Convinced, Ahimelech gives David the priests' week-old bread from the Table of Showbread to sustain him and his men (who are in hiding). But Doeg, the Edomite and one of Saul's servants is also at Nob, and he sees David.

David has no weapon and asks the High Priest for Goliath's sword, kept as a trophy near the Tabernacle. Goliath was a huge man, and so was his sword. Does David intend to use it? Nah. But David plans to flee to Philistine territory beyond Saul's reach. The blade is possibly a gift from a "defector" or to smooth the way for sanctuary. But King Achish's servants refresh the king's mind that David is an arch enemy. Fearing for his life, David feigns insanity, and he is (thankfully) denied refuge.

Saul grows worse! Chapter 22 reveals David is making exile arrangements. He hides in the cave of Adullam (about five miles west of Jerusalem and the same distance from Saul's court). David begins to assemble a band of fighting men drawn from those who were "desperate, in debt or discontented" (21:2). Have you heard of the show *The A-*

Team? These guys are David's *D-Team*, who are unacceptable under normal circumstances because of their *D-fects*. Isn't that an excellent start for an army or a team of bodyguards? His family joins David for the obvious reason the whole of Jesse's family is now on Saul's radar. From there, David treks east to Moab and places his family in protective custody with the king of Moab (21:3). Then the prophet, Gad, gets a word from the Lord for David to leave his stronghold in Moab and return to the area of Adullam and camp in the forest of Hereth (about 2 miles south of the cave of Adullam).

Saul finally gets intelligence about David's travels. It wasn't from his servants because they didn't know anything. But he berates them anyway as conspiring against him. Doeg the Edomite now makes his play for Saul's favor. He rats out David as having visited the town of Nob and what the High PRIest Ahimelech did for him, giving his provisions and Goliath's sword.

Saul calls in Ahimelech and his family to punish them for their assumed conspiracy to aid and abet his enemy. Even though Ahimelech makes his defense based on their ignorance and knowledge of David's character and loyalty, Saul takes Ahimelech's defense of David as treason and orders them all slain. Wow, how separated from God has Saul become to order the cold-blooded murder of Yehovah's priests? But wisely, none of his servants would do it. However, Doeg the Edomite (a descendant of Esau, remember?) is more than willing to do it, going far and above the call of duty. "Doeg the Edomite went and executed the priests himself. On that day, he killed eighty-five men who wore linen ephods. He also struck down Nob, the city of the priests, with the sword—both men and women, infants and nursing babies, oxen, donkeys, and sheep." What a bloodthirsty little creep! And right now, I bet you're hoping he gets what's coming to him!

Ahimelech's son, Abiathar, escapes the slaughter and finds his way to David. The future king takes responsibility for what happened because he saw Doeg at Nob and knew the creep would squeal to Saul (21:23).

INSIGHT

When David showed up at the Tabernacle in Nob, he and his men-in-hiding were famished and needed food. But the only bread available was the Bread of the Presence (the twelve loaves from the Table of Showbread) that only the priests were technically allowed to eat because of their "holiness" or consecration to the Lord. So is David guilty of profaning God's holiness or stealing God's bread? While the Lord is concerned with ritual purity, what is ultimately more important – the Torah's letter or the Torah's intent? Many rabbis teach that even the Torah itself may be violated if life is at stake. It is always

lawful to do good and save a life. The spirit of the Torah was kept through Ahimelech's compassionate provision. In his teaching, Jesus referenced this using the same letter vs. intent argument (Matthew 12:1-8).

March 20 : Scriptures 1 Samuel 23-25

SUMMARY

As if fleeing from Saul wasn't enough, in chapter 23, David gets a distress call, "Look, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah and raiding the threshing floors" (23:1). Keilah is not far from Adullam. But rather than run to the need, David wisely seeks the Lord for guidance. He has to do it twice because his men were hesitant to have to battle both Saul and the Philistines. But the Lord gives David assurance that he and his men would indeed triumph. They drive the Philistines and their livestock away from the Judahites' threshing floors (where grain is stored). However, it didn't take long for intelligence to reach Saul about David's presence in Keilah (23:7). Figuring the Lord has turned David over to him, Saul moves quickly to overtake his fleeing commander.

Again, David consults the Lord. The Lord tells him two things – Saul's coming, and the people of Keilah will turn David over to Saul. Well, that's the thanks you get, right? David and his six hundred men take off and run deeper into the center of Judah's territory. It's not a wrong choice because Saul is a Benjaminite, and David is of Judah. David would get more support from his own tribe. And even though Saul generally knows where David is, the Lord prevents the king from finding him.

While David is in Horesh of the Wilderness of Ziph (still central Judah), Jonathan arrives and "encouraged him in his faith in God" (23:16). I find this funny. Saul can't find David, but his son, Jonathan, can. The two guys reinforce their covenant with one another and look to David's future as Israel's king. While Jonathan is swearing loyalty to David, the Ziphites are (like Doeg) ratting David out. Saul thanks them and sets out to capture his foe. And the chase is on!

In chapter 23's end, Saul and his army are on the opposite side of the mountain from David and his men and closing in fast. Suddenly, word comes to Saul that the Philistines are staging an incursion into Israelite territory again. Saul has to break off his pursuit to attack the Philistines while David makes good his escape to the oasis at En-Gedi. If you get a chance, do an online search for "En-Gedi" to see what a beautiful place it is in the middle of the Judean wilderness on the west side of the Jordan River valley. En-Gedi was a perfect pick as a place for David to refresh and recoup.

But Saul refuses to give up. In chapter 24, once Saul finishes driving off the Philistines, he returns to the chase. He finds out that David is in the vicinity of En-Gedi, so he heads to the area. One there, nature calls (24:3). Yup, Saul has to go to the bathroom, so he finds a cave to relieve himself. *It just happens to be the cave in which David and his troops are hiding*

way in the back. David has a golden opportunity to get rid of his enemy and claim the crown he knows the Lord has put aside. But David, being the man of God he is, refuses to take Israel's throne the easy, illegitimate, and ungodly way. Even though his men urge him to take King Saul's life, David refuses but does sneak up on Saul to "make his point." How ironic that the one who tried to pin David to walls numerous times is now in danger of being "pinned!" But David only slices off the corner of the vulnerable king's royal robe. Saul may have laid his robe aside to take care of business. But if not, then the event is even more intense since David was not only very close to Saul, he was near enough to drop him immediately!

Now, this is a significant act, both literally and symbolically. It proves David had the opportunity to smite his foe but refused out of respect for Saul's position as king and calling by God. It confirms how close to death Saul had been, and it becomes a way for David to prove his allegiance. If Saul is deposed as king, it would be the Lord alone who does it.

Symbolically, the corner of the robe is where the *tzit-tzit*, the "tassels" or fringe with the blue thread, was tied. The tassels are on the corners of the men's garments to remind the wearer of the Torah. If Saul were Torah-observant, as he likely was, then the corner David removed would have had one of the "Torah-reminding tassels" attached to it. The tassel may not have reminded Saul of his duty to God, but it sure smote David's conscience. Perhaps he was guilt-stricken because it was the closest thing to "snatching the kingdom" he could get without actually doing it. David is so sensitive to the Lord he couldn't do even the smallest act that violated the Lord's plan. Interestingly, this is reminiscent of the "hem-tearing" incident with Samuel. That's twice a hem has been torn, indicating Saul's disqualification – first by the prophet Samuel and then by David.

With the corner-cutting accomplished and repented of, David restrains his men and allows Saul to leave utterly unaware of how close to death he was. David immediately reveals himself to his adversary with Saul's garment corner in hand. David's speech is remarkable (24:9-15). It's so stirring. Please don't read through it quickly. David is humble and self-deprecating, *and taking a huge risk*. This is a make-or-break moment. Saul could respond by quickly apprehending the vulnerable and trapped commander. But he doesn't. David's words break through his hard heart. Saul sees for at least a moment David's commitment to him and that he's no threat. Saul also sees that David is king material and will succeed him as Israel's king.

The chapter closes on a tenuous note. Saul knows that David will undoubtedly be king, and Saul asks David to make a covenant to spare his family when he ascends the throne.

Such a covenant is crucial because many kings ensure their reign (and personal safety) by knocking off any competition, especially those who might try to claim the throne based on family inheritance. David makes the covenant. Saul returns home, but David, wisely, stays in his stronghold.

Chapter 25 suddenly shifts from all the political intrigue to a significant moment in David's life and training. It starts with Samuel's death and quickly pans to David as he heads down to the wilderness of Paran, in the deep south of the land of Israel, where he and his men set up camp out of Saul's reach.

There's a rich man, Nabal, and his wife, Abigail, in the area, and they have quite the livestock operation with three thousand sheep and one thousand goats (25:2). Abigail is "intelligent and beautiful," and her husband Nabal is described as "harsh and evil in his dealings." In brief, David and his men have protected the area families from marauders. Once, a pastor I know quipped that David "was running a protection racket." That's funny, but not true. It would have been expected for an Israelite commander from Judah to protect his clan from enemy attacks. Now that it's sheep-shearing time (a time of hard work capped off with festivities), David asks if Nabal would be willing to sponsor a feast to "show appreciation" for David and the crew's protection. Nabal selfishly rebuffs David under the pretense he doesn't know any "David son of Jesse" (25:10-11). C'mon, really? Who hadn't heard of David's victory over Goliath and the Philistines? Even Saul's servant girls were singing David's praises. It's clear Nabal is trying to beg off from offering hospitality and showing a little gratitude.

There's also another take on his response. It could also be that he's aware of the situation between David and King Saul. Perhaps he knew that David was Saul's son-in-law, and he knew that David was out of favor with Saul. With Saul as king, Nabal knew which side his bread was buttered and wasn't willing to help out of fear of Saul's retribution. We can conclude this based on Abigail's words in verse 28.

Regardless, Nabal's response doesn't go over well with David. In a fit of anger, likely prompted by his wounded pride, David mobilizes his *D-Team* to teach the ungrateful Nabal a lesson (25:13). Thankfully, Nabal's wife Abigail hears of her husband's cruel rebuff to David's request. The servant does a great job telling how good David has been to Nabal's shepherds (25:15-16) and how everybody knows (especially Abigail) what a knothead her husband can be. Isn't it funny how everyone in Nabal's household knew that he was a creep? His servants obviously had a very low opinion of their master that they dared to use a VERY derogatory name for him – "son of Belial" or "son of worthlessness" – in front of his wife! Furthermore, nothing is said about Abigail

disagreeing with them. The servant rightly assumes that Nabal's crabbiness and inhospitality will bring trouble to everyone.

Abigail is as intelligent as the initial report from verse 2. She's seen the situation, assesses it perfectly, and jumps into action to remedy it while her husband remains blind to his impending doom. Unbeknownst to her husband, Abigail prepares a mobile feast to take to David and meets him as he's on his way to her home to show Nabal who's boss! Boy, is David ticked! "I guarded everything that belonged to this man in the wilderness for nothing. He was not missing anything, yet he paid me back evil for good. May God punish me and do so severely if I let any of his males survive until morning" (25:21-22). Yes, David has gone over the top. Unless someone can temper David's temper, this isn't going to end well.

That someone is Abigail! She truly is the master of Nabal's household. She gathers together two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five dressed sheep, five seahs (one bushel) of flour, one hundred raisin cakes, and two hundred cakes of pressed figs. Quite the shopping list! Not only that, Abigail had to coordinate the food preparation so it was ready for the advancing troops. Even for six hundred men, this broke down into quite the picnic! Abigail sends the servants and the food first (25:19). Why was this a wise move? It's similar to when Jacob sent waves of "goodies" ahead of him to pacify his brother Esau as Jacob returned home (Genesis 32). Remember, the way to a man's heart through his stomach.

The quickly advancing David is enraged! What's David's justification for cold-blooded murder? "All that work for nothing" and "the ingrate stiffed me!" Since there was no apparent contract, was David presuming upon Nabal's generosity? Possibly. But the servant already said how great David had been. Plus, the culture of the day expected both hospitality and gratitude. But this does raise whether David was doing right or wrong in God's eyes. Was David actually willing to pay back an inhospitable act with murder? If so, now he's a king *not* after the Lord's heart, a tyrant ready to deal with a slight by killing. Now we can see why this event is such a valuable lesson for the future shepherd-king. This incident won't be the last time we'll see David tempted to murder to get what he wants.

Abigail meets David and his entourage, swings down from her donkey, and falls on her face in front of David. I'll let you read through the section, so I'll just summarize her wonderful traits on display: She has courage (25:20), humility (25:23), and is willing to take the blame (25:24-25). She is God-fearing (25:26), generous (25:27), humble, faithful, loyal, and concerned for others (25:28). She is aware of needs beyond just her household

(25:29) and is a wise, discerning, and godly person (25:30-31). Wow, what a woman! The most valuable thing is she kept David from innocent bloodshed, i.e., from taking life for an unnecessary reason. Doing so would have tainted David as God's man, for God is just. His man (or woman) be the same.

David realizes the great good Abigail has done for him and gratefully accepts her gift and sends her on her way. When she returns home, Abigail sees her husband has already been hitting the jug, so she waits until he's sober the following morning to tell him of his averted demise. The news apparently causes him a stroke, from which he dies ten days later (25:38).

When David hears of Nabal's death, he realizes he "dodged a self-inflicted bullet" of revenge. Because Abigail made such an impression on him, David asks her to be his wife along with Ahinoam of Jezreel. But what of his wife, Michal? Since David has "abandoned her" as a fugitive on the king, she is given to Palti, son of Laish.

INSIGHT

What happens when you get ahead of the Lord's training? What would David have lacked if his men had killed Saul and David assumed the kingship ahead of the Lord's schedule? Are we tempted to "cut corners" to reach our "destiny?" After all, according to some prosperity teachers and positive thinkers, our destiny and personal fulfillment is more important than our character development and obedience to God!

Also, ever since I heard this quote, it has stuck with me and guided me: "Mercy – The infrequent art of turning thumbs up on an old antagonist at the end of one's rapier." (The Singer, Calvin Miller) David indeed showed mercy to the person who had been the most merciless to him.

March 21 : Scriptures 1 Samuel 26-29

SUMMARY

So, you thought everything was reconciled between Saul and David, right? Wrong. Saul hears of David's location and again sets out to apprehend his fleeing commander (26:2). Saul and his force arrive at "the hill of Hachilah opposite Jeshimon," and they encamp for the night. David hears of this and decides to do a little spying for himself. From his vantage point in the wilderness hills, David can see that Saul is in the middle of the camp with his loyal commander, Abner, next to him. The other warriors surround the king. David makes a daring play – *to sneak into Saul's camp!* The men think it's an assassination attempt, but David has other ideas. Remember, David understands the Lord's chain of command, the Lord's anointing, and those people to whom He has given authority. The Lord doesn't need anyone stepping up to do what He can easily do, such as getting Saul out of David's way.

David heads to Saul's camp at night with Ahimelech, the Hittite, and Abishai. Abishai is the brother of Joab, David's commander. What's remarkable is that everyone is asleep, and they stay asleep! Where were the guards? Asleep, because the Lord put them all into a deep snooze (26:12).

Why is the spear near Saul's head such an essential item to point out? To prove that David has the opportunity to kill his tormentor and doesn't. Abishai volunteers for the task, but David denies him in pure Davidic fashion, "Don't destroy him, for who can lift a hand against the Lord's anointed and be innocent? As the Lord lives, the Lord will certainly strike him down: either his day will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish. However, as the Lord is my witness, I will never lift my hand against the Lord's anointed" (26:9-11). But they do come up with a plan similar to what happened earlier. The spies take items that are nearest to Saul to prove David could have easily assassinated King Saul, and no one would have noticed (26:11-12).

Once he's a safe distance away, David reveals himself and how close to death Saul was again. David berates Abner, Saul's commander, for dereliction of duty and asks the newly-awakened king why he is pursuing him without cause. Again, Saul sees what a fool he's been to doubt David and asks David to return with him. Seriously, if you were David, would you return with an unstable leader like Saul? But David's comment is fascinating, "The Lord will repay every man for his righteousness and his loyalty. I wasn't willing to lift my hand against the Lord's anointed, even though the Lord handed you over to me today" (26:23). Understand what's going on. David refuses to harm the *formerly* anointed Saul and treats him as if he were still God's anointed king. On the other

hand, Saul seeks to harm God's actual anointed one and treats him as if David were not. Once again, Saul leaves chastised, and David moves off a safe distance from the crazed and demonized king.

In Chapter 27, David wisely escapes to Philistine territory. He figures if he goes over to the Philistine side, Saul won't risk a war to pursue him (27:1, 4). David appeals to Achish, the son of Gath's king, Maach, for sanctuary. Achish grants David's request because who wouldn't want an enemy's disillusioned commander with such battle skills and effective troops? He gives David a home base – Ziklag.

And now David plays both sides. On one side, he attacks Israel's enemies to help his people (27:8). But when he reports to Achish, David tells the king he was raiding against his own people. In this way, David built favor with his people and trust with Achish (27:12). But David will pay for his deception.

Meanwhile, in chapter 28, the Philistines mobilize an attack on Israel (28:1). When it starts, it will be a massive assault that will take place in the central Jezreel Valley and surrounding hills. This area is strategic because not only is the land exceptionally fertile, but major trade routes carve their way through the area. The people that hold this region have powerful economic and military advantages!

But now David finds himself in a tight spot. He'll have to fight his people. David assures Achish that he's with him all the way and will show him what he can do. Even worse, David is not only a part of the Philistine command structure, but Achish rewards David by making him his "chief guardian (bodyguard) forever" (28:2). David's answer is deliberately vague, yet it convinces Achish. However, David now faces the consequences of his decision and deception. He's going to have to fight against the countrymen he is anointed to lead and for Israel's sworn enemy at that! He's put himself into a challenging position through his choice, perhaps even fighting against the Lord Himself. David is forced to reinforce his charade with Achish and the text leaves us hanging.

The literary camera pans back to the field of battle. The Philistines and their iron chariots gather at Shunem. Saul and his army encamped nearby on the hills of Gilboa. Yup, it would be a good time to check your map. Search "Saul's final battle" or "1 Samuel 27 battle map" online. You'll find *lots* of good resources. You quickly see that the Philistines have control of the valley with their iron chariots. The Israelites have the high ground that makes it hard to negotiate with those same chariots.

David's in a terrible position, and so is Saul. The text points out that Saul had previously (and righteously) removed from the land all the occultists he could find. Saul is terrified and needs guidance. But the Lord isn't answering.

Every avenue Saul tries for God's "intel" was blocked. Samuel is dead, so Saul has no access to the Lord through him. He's had no dreams from the Lord (direct communication). He has no Urim and Thummim to relay direction from the Lord because he had killed all the priests at Nob and the High Priest, Abiathar, had defected to David, bringing with him the Ephod. Finally, Saul has no prophetic voice to give him the Lord's guidance since Gad's prophet was with David. So, since Saul didn't want to listen to the Lord, the Lord had imposed spiritual silence on him. Desperate for supernatural help, Saul has his team search for someone who could access the spiritual realm. Why? He's going to use an occult practitioner to talk to Samuel. Yes, you read that right.

The Torah declares the death penalty for mediums, "A man or a woman who is a medium, or who has familiar spirits, shall surely be put to death; they shall stone them with stones. Their blood shall be upon them" (Leviticus 20:27). The Lord clearly states that all occult sources are off-limits (Exodus 22:18; Leviticus 19:31; Deuteronomy 18:9-14). However, stubborn Saul pushes ahead.

Although reluctant at first, the reassured medium proceeds to draw up Samuel from the place of the dead – Sheol. When she brings up the great prophet, her eyes are opened, and the medium sees Samuel and cries out in fear. Why? First, she actually brought Samuel (in spirit form) up from Sheol, and Samuel had been the Lord's closest representative in life. Did his appearance scare and convict her of her forbidden activity? Secondly, by successfully bringing up Samuel, she finally recognizes Saul and figures she's been entrapped and now faces death. Imagine being a backwater psychic and suddenly finding yourself in the middle of a conversation between Israel's two highest-ranking leaders – one dead, one alive!

Samuel asks why Saul had disturbed him. What was Saul's answer? "God wasn't answering me, so I resorted to calling on the only prophet I knew and one who could always get a sure word at that." Does this justify his actions? No. This excuse is similar to Saul's "impending doom" excuse, "the men were fleeing..." (13:11-12). Here's another contrast between Saul and David – Saul sought the Lord through others, whereas David sought the Lord personally.

Samuel's response was devastating to Saul. The Lord's Word still held. "There is no hope for you, Saul. The Lord tore the kingdom from you and gave it to David. Now he will be

king shortly because *you*, Saul, didn't obey God's command regarding the Amalekites." Samuel pronounces Saul's death sentence, tells the king that Israel will be defeated, and that Saul's sons (specifically Jonathan) will die the next day (28:19). Saul's response to these terrible words is complete collapse! He appears to reach the end of his mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual strength. After much encouragement, Saul ate his last meal and returned to the Israelite front line (28:20-25).

Chapter 29 is our cliff-hanger. As the Philistine commanders review the troops just before the battle begins, they notice David with Achish of Gath. Suffice to say, they're a little shocked. "Hey Achish, you know that this is the same David who has dispatched so many of us in battle? Get him out of here, so he doesn't turn against us in battle! What better way for David to get back into King Saul's good graces than by presenting him with a bunch of our heads?" (29:4).

Though Achish objects, he dismisses David, who puts up a big front to make Achish think he's disappointed with not being able to fight his kinspeople in war. Clueless Achish is taken in and dismisses David (29:10), who undoubtedly breathed a hushed sigh of relief! David returns to Philistine territory and his town, Ziklag, free of his obligation.

INSIGHT

A heart after God has peace amid impossibilities. A heart that's focused on our desires trembles at challenging circumstances.

Faith declares that God is bigger than our circumstances. Doubt declares that we're not sure if God is bigger than our circumstances. Unbelief declares that our circumstance is bigger than God. For this reason, the Lord continually trains us to trust Him, to build our faith regardless of what circumstances arise.