

Explore the Bible.®

Summer 2016 > Eric Geiger, General Editor

1 Samuel

LifeWay | Adults

SHARING THE GOSPEL

The word *gospel* means “good news.” It is the message about Christ, the kingdom of God, and salvation. Use the following guide to share the gospel.



1. God rules. The Bible tells us God created everything, including you and me, and He is in charge of everything. (See Genesis 1:1; Revelation 4:11; and Colossians 1:16-17.)

2. We sinned. Since the time of Adam and Eve, everyone has chosen to disobey God. (See Romans 3:23.) The Bible calls this sin. Because God is holy, God cannot be around sin. Sin separates us from God and deserves God’s punishment of death. (See Romans 6:23.)

3. God provided. God sent His Son Jesus, the perfect solution to our sin problem, to rescue us from the punishment we deserve. It’s something we, as sinners, could never earn on our own. Jesus alone saves us. (See John 3:16 and Ephesians 2:8-9.)

4. Jesus gives. Jesus lived a perfect life, died on the cross for our sins, and rose again. Because Jesus gave up His life for us, we can be welcomed into God’s family for eternity. This is the best gift ever. (See Romans 5:8; 2 Corinthians 5:21; and 1 Peter 3:18.)

5. We respond. We can respond to Jesus. The ABCs of Becoming a Christian is a simple tool that helps us remember how to respond when prompted by the Holy Spirit to receive the gift Jesus offers.

Admit to God that you are a sinner. The first people God created chose to sin and disobey God. Ever since then, all people have chosen to sin and disobey. (See Romans 3:23.) Tell God you messed up and you are sorry for doing your own thing and turning away from Him through your thoughts, words, and actions. Repent, and turn away from your sin. (See Acts 3:19 and 1 John 1:9.) Repenting doesn’t just mean turning from doing bad things to doing good things. It means turning from sin and even from your own good works, and turning to Jesus, trusting only in Him to save you.

Believe that Jesus is God’s Son and accept God’s gift of forgiveness from sin. You must believe that only Jesus can save you, and you cannot save yourself from your sin problem—not even by praying to God, going to church, or reading your Bible. Your faith or your trust is only in Jesus and what He did for you through His life, death, and resurrection. (See Acts 16:31; Acts 4:12; John 14:6; and Ephesians 2:8-9.)

Confess your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Tell God and tell others what you believe. If Jesus is your Savior, you are trusting only in Him to save you. Jesus is also Lord, which means He is in charge of your life. You can start following Him and doing what He says in the Bible. You are born again into a new life and can look forward to being with God forever. (See Romans 10:9-10,13.)

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»» MEET THE WRITERS

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A WORD FROM THE GENERAL EDITOR



The Bible is an amazing gift from our awesome God. In it, He reveals Himself and His glory for us to witness. I'm excited that you are joining in for a journey through the Book of 1 Samuel. It is epic and beautiful.

In 1 Samuel we will see the story of God's people. As we do, we see the greatness of our God. He is worthy. He is holy. He is the God above all gods, the King above all kings. As your group or class discusses this book, I want to encourage you to see the overarching theme of God's greatness as the umbrella that is above each story.

So many times, life takes its toll on us and we are prone to take our eyes off God and His great sufficiency for us. Because of this, your discussions and emphasis on God's greatness and the victories that He wins His people will be a great reminder and encouragement for those you are serving. In 1 Samuel, God's greatness will be a constant background as you discuss stories of deliverance, victory, forgiveness, and worship.

As you study the text in its context and seek to obey it in your context, I know the Lord will encourage you and challenge you. Enjoy the journey through 1 Samuel! Our God is still great, is still caring for His people, and is still the King above all kings.

In Christ,
Eric Geiger



Eric Geiger serves as Vice President of the Resources Division at LifeWay Christian Resources. Eric received his doctorate in leadership and church ministry from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has authored and co-authored several books, including Creature of the Word and the best-selling church leadership book, Simple Church. He also serves as the senior pastor of ClearView Baptist Church in Franklin, Tennessee.

INTRODUCTION TO 1 SAMUEL

We all face transitions in our lives—from one life stage to the next, from one place of living to the next, or from one job to the next. Each transition brings its own set of joys and challenges. How we handle our transitions in life can have great significance and consequences.

First Samuel is a book about significant transitions in the life of the people of Israel during the 11th century B.C. During this period, Israel went from being a loose confederation of tribes led by judges (primarily military leaders rather than judicial leaders) to being a kingdom ruled by a king. First Samuel also tells about individual Israelites and couples who experienced significant transitions in their lives.

»» PURPOSE

First Samuel narrates a key period of transition in the Old Testament history of Israel, God's covenant people. The book highlights the lives of individuals whose ministries significantly shaped the period and Israel's future—in particular, Samuel, Saul, and David.

Samuel served Israel as God's prophetic voice and unifying leader from his youth until old age. Then he guided the tribes through a transition to monarchy. The record of Saul's kingship was mixed, although Saul began well with some decisive military victories. However, his disobedience of God at key points led to God's refusing to establish a royal dynasty in Saul. Instead, God directed Samuel to anoint a new king, one whose heart would be devoted wholly to the Lord God. This new king was David, the son of Jesse, a man of the tribe of Judah from Bethlehem. Thus, it was the underlying purpose of 1 Samuel to show how David rose to become the king of Israel. From a broader biblical perspective, 1 Samuel casts a prophetic shadow forward into the future. In time, God would send Jesus, His ultimate Anointed One and the King of kings, to receive "the throne of His father David" (Luke 1:32).

»» WRITER

Neither 1 Samuel nor 2 Samuel identify the human writer. Ancient Israelite tradition posits that 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel existed originally as one book. If so, then Samuel would not have been responsible for the entire work, since his death is recorded in 1 Samuel 25:1. Some Bible specialists propose that Samuel wrote or influenced the writing of 1 Samuel 1–24 and that later prophets such as Nathan (see 2 Sam. 7:1-3; 12:1-12) and Gad (see 2 Sam. 24:11-13,18-19) collaborated to write the rest of 1 Samuel and all of 2 Samuel. By referring to territory that "belongs to the kings of Judah today," 1 Samuel 27:6 hints that

the combined book may have been completed soon after 931–930 B.C. This is the time when Israel split into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, following the death of King Solomon (see 1 Kings 12).

What we can affirm in terms of authorship is that God’s Spirit guided the human writer(s) of 1 Samuel. The finished product accurately communicates all that God intended for us to know (see 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

»» ORGANIZATION

First Samuel can be organized broadly under two headings: Samuel’s ministry (1–12) and Saul’s reign (13–31). The first section opens with the account of Samuel’s birth and call to be a prophet (1–3). This is followed by a dramatic narrative concerning the loss of the ark to the Philistines and its miraculous return (4–6). Following the ark’s return, Samuel called the Israelites to repentance and to trust the God of the ark in their fight against the Philistines (7). Finally, the first section includes a description of Israel’s transition to a monarchy (8–12). Because Samuel’s sons acted corruptly, the Israelite elders demanded that Samuel appoint a single leader, a king, so that Israel would be governed in the same way as the surrounding nations. Directed by God, Samuel anointed Saul and then led the people to confirm him as king. Following a military victory against the Ammonites that Saul led, Samuel gathered the Israelites in an assembly at Gilgal to reconfirm Saul. Samuel warned the people to trust and obey God above all.

In the second broad section of the book, God led Samuel to declare that as a result of the king’s disobedience, Saul’s family line would not continue in the kingship (13–15). Samuel then was directed by God to anoint the next king, David the son of Jesse (16). Following his anointing, David was called to serve in Saul’s court. The narrative that follows this appointment describes the rising popularity of David and the steady decline of Saul. David defeated the Philistine warrior Goliath (17). Although winning the friendship of Saul’s son Jonathan and marrying Saul’s daughter Michal, David was under a constant threat on his life from Saul and was forced at times to flee for refuge (18–30). At the end of the Book of 1 Samuel, King Saul and his sons were killed in battle (31), setting the stage for the transition to 2 Samuel and the story of David’s dynamic rule over Israel.

»» KEY THEMES

Leadership—First Samuel offers examples of good and bad leadership. When leaders focused their attention on honoring and serving the Lord, Israel flourished. However, when leaders turned from God and disobeyed His commands, those leaders eventually failed, and the people suffered.

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God's sovereignty—According to the Book of Genesis, God established His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants (Gen. 17:2; 26:3; 28:13-15). Then God raised up Moses to deliver His people from bondage in Egypt. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wilderness to Mount Sinai, where God codified His covenant with Israel in the law (Ex. 19:3-6). Later Moses led the people to the edge of the promised land, but because he disobeyed God, he was not allowed to enter the land (Deut. 32:48-52). Another leader, Joshua, led a new generation of Israelites to conquer and possess the promised land, assigning territory by lot to the various tribes (Josh. 11:23). During the period of the judges, God's people lived in a seemingly endless cycle of idolatry, defeat, repentance, and deliverance (Judg. 2:16-22). Through it all, God showed His sovereign faithfulness to His covenant people. That sovereign faithfulness continued throughout the times and events described in 1 Samuel.

Sin's consequences—The Bible repeatedly warns God's people to follow the Lord and to avoid sin. Sin always carries terrible consequences. The priest Eli and his sons faced God's punishment for their abuse of the sacrificial system (1 Sam. 2:27-35). God removed them and raised up Samuel, who followed Him faithfully and led Israel well. Many people at Beth-shemesh died when they showed irreverence for the ark of the covenant after God rescued it from the Philistines (6:19-20). The Israelites experienced sad consequences for insisting they needed a king rather than trusting in and following God-given spiritual leaders. In the end, God granted their request, but the sad consequences soon followed. Saul's disobedience to God's command led to Saul's decline and ultimately to the loss of his dynasty (15:24-29).

Covenant—First Samuel consistently demonstrates God's faithfulness to Israel, His covenant people. God had established this covenant, and He remained faithful to His people through their faithfulness as well as their failures. Samuel led Israel in a confirmation of the covenant, and Saul's establishment as king provided another time of renewal. Rebellion led to Israel's judgment; faithfulness led to Israel's blessing.

Kingship—First Samuel 8 marks a turning point in Israel's history when the people asked Samuel to appoint a king for them. Although Deuteronomy 17:14-20 prescribed conditions for kingship, the text is clear in 1 Samuel that God was not yet ready to establish a monarchy in Israel (1 Sam. 8:6-9). Saul demonstrated some positive qualities but ultimately proved to be a poor king. As 1 Samuel ends, Saul has died in battle (31:8-13). In 2 Samuel, God not only established David as His choice for Israel but also laid the foundation for the future coming of humanity's ultimate King, Jesus Christ.

OUTLINE OF 1 SAMUEL

- I. Samuel's Birth (1:1–2:11)
- II. Samuel's Call (2:12–3:21)
- III. Samuel's Ministry (4:1–7:17)
- IV. Crying for a King (8:1–11:15)
- V. Samuel's Warning (12:1-25)
- VI. Saul's Rise and Rebellion (13:1–15:35)
- VII. David's Selection (16:1-23)
- VIII. David's Victory (17:1-58)
- IX. Saul's Conflict with David (18:1–26:25)
- X. Saul's End (27:1–31:13)

ANSWERED!

God answers the prayers of those who humbly seek Him.

On July 28, 1980, my wife and I moved our family to Cincinnati, Ohio, so that I could pursue doctoral studies. We had two preschoolers at the time, a three-year-old son and a two-year-old daughter. Cincinnati was about twelve hundred miles from where any of our parents lived, and we knew that living so far away from them would be tough. We also knew that the experience would stretch our faith in God. We had no idea, though, how much God would teach us about His faithfulness. Neither could we imagine at the start how much we would learn about God's ability to answer prayer.

We kept a journal throughout our years in Cincinnati. When we faced challenges, my wife and I would pray about them, ask God to intervene, and then write about the experiences in our journal. When God answered our prayers, we then recorded His answers. For example, one day our car battery died. I looked at our checkbook balance at the time, and it read nineteen cents! Yet that very day we received a gift in the mail from our home church that more than covered the cost of a new battery. Another time we were almost out of food in our cupboards. Out of the blue one of our neighbors knocked on the door. She was holding a huge jar of vegetable soup that she had canned that day and wanted to give to us. We thanked God for providing over and over for us—always just in time—and we wrote about His faithfulness in our journal. Whenever we got discouraged or started to doubt God's plan for us, we simply got out the journal and read the entries again.

As we begin these Bible studies in 1 Samuel, the passages selected for this session from chapter 1 could easily remind us of an entry in a spiritual journal. The verses tell about a severe challenge faced by a man named Elkanah and his beloved wife Hannah, who was unable to have children. Hannah desperately wanted to have a child, and she pleaded with God in prayer about it. God answered her prayer by allowing her to become pregnant and give birth to a son. That son, Samuel, would grow up and lead the people of Israel through some very difficult times of transition. This story of God's faithfulness came to be recorded in Scripture for the instruction and encouragement of all who read it (2 Tim. 3:16).

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 SAMUEL 1:1–2:11

First Samuel begins by introducing a family from Ephraim, one of Israel's tribal territories. A man named Elkanah [el KAY nuh] had two wives—Peninnah [pih NIN uh] and Hannah—and each year they would travel to the sanctuary at Shiloh to offer sacrifices to the Lord (1:1-3).

Hannah was childless (1:5), and Peninnah, who had children, used the situation to taunt Hannah without mercy (1:6-7). Elkanah's attempts to reassure Hannah failed (1:8), for she desperately desired to have a son.

Hannah prayed to the Lord from the depths of her anguish (1:9-11). She vowed that if He would give her a son, she would give him back to the Lord. That is, he would belong to the Lord first and then to her. As a symbol of this promise, the boy's hair would never be cut, indicating he would be placed under a Nazirite [NAZ uh right] vow of dedication to God (see Num. 6:1-8).

Eli, the elderly chief priest at Shiloh, watched Hannah as she prayed in her anguish, and erroneously concluded that she was drunk (1 Sam. 1:12-14). He scolded her for being irreverent. Hannah, however, clarified that she was praying to the Lord out of her brokenness and pain (1:15-16). Eli then blessed her, and Hannah went away encouraged (1:17-18).

The family returned home to Ramah [RAY muh], and in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son, whom she named Samuel (1:19-20). After she weaned her son, the family went again to Shiloh and offered a sacrifice to the Lord (1:24-28). A joyful Hannah appeared before Eli and reminded him of the blessing he had prayed for her. True to her word, Hannah dedicated Samuel to the Lord and left him at the sanctuary to serve with Eli. God later would use Samuel to lead Israel.

Hannah prayed to the Lord again—this time from the depths of her joy (2:1-10). She rejoiced in all God had done for her. She proclaimed God as the Giver of life. Samuel remained at Shiloh, serving the Lord in the presence of Eli the priest, while Hannah and Elkanah returned to Ramah (2:11).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

HANNAH'S PRAYER (1 Sam. 1:10-11)

Hannah desperately wanted to give her husband a son, but so far she had not. It seemed that giving birth wasn't the Lord's will for her. In that culture, a barren wife felt deep shame. It added to Hannah's feelings of guilt when

other women, especially other wives who had children, taunted her. Hannah was desperate; she poured out her heart to the Lord in prayer.

We should note that nothing in the text indicates Hannah's barrenness resulted from any sin on her part. Scripture affirms that God sometimes allows suffering in people's lives to bring glory to Him (John 9:1-3; 2 Cor. 12:7-9). In any case, the text affirms that Hannah took her burden to the Lord.

VERSE 10

Deeply hurt, Hannah prayed to the LORD and wept with many tears.

The words **deeply hurt** ("deep anguish," NIV) reveal that Hannah's pain penetrated her innermost being; it impacted all she was and did. Her inability to conceive was constantly on her mind. The phrase rendered *deeply hurt* literally means "bitter of soul" and includes the Hebrew term (*mara*) used by a grief-stricken Naomi to describe her situation after the deaths of her husband and two grown sons (see Ruth 1:3-5,20).

Hannah prayed to the LORD. Perhaps as she did so, Hannah remembered other Israelite women from past generations to whom God had given children when all seemed hopeless. For example, Abraham's wife Sarah had given birth to Isaac—her first child—when she was in her nineties, long past her childbearing years (Gen. 17:17; 18:11; 21:1-2). Samson's mother had been unable to conceive until the Lord miraculously empowered her to become pregnant (Judg. 13:2-3,24). Perhaps examples like these gave Hannah hope that God would respond to her prayers similarly.

The name *the LORD* reveals that Hannah prayed to the covenant God of Israel, Yahweh. This name in Hebrew literally means "I am who I am" (Ex. 3:14) and can also be rendered as "I cause to be what exists." Thus, it emphasizes on the one hand God's absolute sovereignty over all as the Creator-Sustainer and on the other hand God's gracious, ongoing nearness to His chosen people (Ex. 6:6-8). Hannah prayed to the only God she believed could speak life into existence within the confines of a heretofore barren womb.

Hannah **wept with many tears** ("wept bitterly," ESV). The Hebrew term stresses the intense level of her grief. The mixture of words and sobs no doubt contributed to Eli's misreading of the situation (1 Sam. 1:12-14).

VERSE 11

Making a vow, she pleaded, "LORD of Hosts, if You will take notice of Your servant's affliction, remember and not forget me, and give Your servant a son, I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and his hair will never be cut."

In the law, vows represented serious commitments. People did not have to make them, but if they did they were to keep them (Num. 30:2). Regulations in the law also guided when a husband could or could not cancel a vow made by his wife (Num. 30:10-15). Hannah's vow thus demonstrated her earnest desire to conceive a son. Elkanah later endorsed her vow (1 Sam. 1:23).

Hannah addressed her vow to the **LORD of Hosts** ("LORD Almighty," NIV). As stated before, the name *LORD* highlighted God's power and sovereignty as well as His presence with His people. The title *of Hosts* emphasized God's command over the celestial armies—either the stars of heaven or heaven's angelic armies. In either case, these countless *Hosts* were available to carry out any command of God, including the command to come to Hannah's aid.

The phrase **if You will take notice** indicates that Hannah wanted the Lord to look closely at her difficult situation. She needed the Lord to help her overcome her affliction as only He could. In Scripture, the word **remember** often means more than bringing something to mind; it means to act on someone's behalf based on an ongoing relationship (see Gen. 8:1; 19:29; Ex. 2:24). In contrast, the word **forget** can describe the opposite: to intentionally choose not to act on someone's behalf. Hannah described herself as God's **servant**—someone who belonged to God and obeyed His will. On the basis of that relationship of trust and dependence on Him, she made her request.

Hannah asked for **a son**. The Hebrew term here literally means "a seed of men." However, the context—note the use of masculine pronouns **him** and **his** in the latter part of the verse—indicates that she desired to have a male child. She vowed that if God granted her request then she would **give him to the LORD all the days of his life**. In other words, Hannah would recognize the child as God's special gift by dedicating him wholly to God.

The words **his hair will never be cut** ("there shall no razor come upon his head," KJV) reveal that Hannah was putting her yet-to-be-born son under a Nazirite vow (Num. 6:5-8). Although usually invoked by the individual, this vow was a promise of special consecration. It required a guarded, humble lifestyle and a commitment to special service to the Lord. In addition, the vow could be in force either for a limited period of time or for a lifetime. Hannah promised a lifetime of consecration for her son.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Nazirite" on pages 1178-1179 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. How might a person dedicated wholly to the Lord bring a blessing on others among God's people? How would you describe what a life wholly dedicated to the Lord looks like today?

ELI'S AFFIRMATION (1 Sam. 1:12-18)

Eli was introduced in 1:3 as the father of Hophni [HAHF nigh] and Phinehas [FIN ih huhs], two priests who turned out to be utterly corrupt (2:12-17,22-34). Eli's sons already were serving as priests at Shiloh when Hannah came to pray, yet Eli also maintained a presence there during worship activities. He was sitting near the sanctuary entrance when Hannah began to pray (1:9).

VERSE 12

While she continued praying in the LORD's presence, Eli watched her lips.

Hannah **continued praying**, a phrase that suggests her prayer was both fervent and for a lengthy time. The phrase **in the LORD's presence** is a reminder that the ark of the covenant was stationed at Shiloh at this time (see 4:4; also Josh. 18:1; Ps. 78:60). Hannah would not have been allowed to be in close proximity to the ark. Nevertheless, simply to be at the sanctuary where the ark rested was to have assurance of being *in the LORD's presence*.

As Hannah prayed, **Eli watched her lips** ("marked her mouth," KJV; "observed her mouth," NIV). Part of a priest's role was to instruct and guide worshipers in proper worship, so Eli was not wrong in observing Hannah's praying. However, he completely misunderstood what he observed.

VERSE 13

Hannah was praying silently, and though her lips were moving, her voice could not be heard. Eli thought she was drunk

The Hebrew phrase rendered **was praying silently** literally means "was speaking unto her heart." In Isaiah 40:2 this phrase emphasizes tenderness of speech, words filled with emotion and concern. Hannah was praying from the depths of her heart, yet **her voice could not be heard**. She was making no audible sounds, although **her lips were moving** (literally "were quivering," "were trembling"). Meanwhile, the most experienced priest at the Lord's sanctuary proved to be spiritually insensitive and inept in regard to Hannah's situation. **Eli thought she was drunk**. He added insult to Hannah's injury.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Prayer" on pages 1320-1322 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What is prayer at its core? What key truths about prayer discussed in the article mean the most to you at this time?

VERSE 14

and scolded her, “How long are you going to be drunk? Get rid of your wine!”

The words **scolded her** (literally “said to her”) convey the likely harsh tone of Eli’s rebuke. He assumed she had drunk too much wine at the sacrificial meal (1 Sam. 1:9). That Eli jumped so quickly to this conclusion might suggest that his sons had allowed (if not promoted) drunkenness and immorality to become all too common at the religious festivals held at Shiloh (see 2:22; compare Judg. 21:19-20; Isa. 28:7).

Eli voiced his stern rebuke by asking Hannah, **“How long are you going to be drunk?”** The accusation must have stung Hannah. She had been pouring out her heart to the Lord in a state of deep emotional anguish. Now the chief priest at the Lord’s sanctuary commanded her, in essence, to go home and sleep off her stupor. In a case of sad irony, Eli sternly chided a true worshiper but failed to deter his two priestly sons from disgracing themselves, their father, and the Lord’s sanctuary by their corrupt activities.

VERSE 15

“No, my lord,” Hannah replied. “I am a woman with a broken heart. I haven’t had any wine or beer; I’ve been pouring out my heart before the LORD.

In her immediate negative response (**“No, my lord”**), Hannah combined respect for Eli’s priestly authority with her need to clarify Eli’s hurtful and wrong conclusion. She was not intoxicated but rather was **a woman with a broken heart** (“a sorrowful spirit,” KJV; “troubled in spirit,” ESV). The Bible affirms that God takes notice of the brokenhearted who humble themselves before Him (Ps. 51:17; Isa. 66:2; Jas. 4:7-10; 1 Pet. 5:6-7).

Not only was Hannah sober, she had not consumed **any wine or beer** (“strong drink,” KJV, ESV)! *Wine* often was served as part of Israel’s sacrifices and festivals (Ex. 29:40; Num. 15:5-10). The Hebrew word rendered *beer* could denote any of a variety of fermented beverages consumed during celebrations (Deut. 14:26). The Bible warns against the dangers of alcoholic beverages (Prov. 20:1; 23:31-35) and forbids drunkenness (Eph. 5:18), listing it among the works of the flesh practiced by those who will not inherit God’s kingdom (Gal. 5:19-21). However, Hannah’s point was that while her emotional state was admittedly troubled, alcoholic drink had nothing to do with it.

Hannah clarified that she had been **pouring out [her] heart before the LORD**. This word-picture describes well the lament-prayer, an honest, verbal confession of one’s helplessness and utter dependence on God to meet a

need (see Lam. 2:19). Tears of sorrow often mingle with the *pouring out* of words (2:18). Hannah's prayer-lament no doubt included a confession of her grievous circumstances and a tearful plea for God to give her a son. Maybe you have experienced such a difficult challenge in your life and need His solution. Are you willing to pour out your heart in prayer to Him?

EXPLORE FURTHER

Reflect on Hannah's experience of pouring out her heart before the Lord. What emotions were involved? What expectations did she have? Then think of an occasion when you poured out your heart to the Lord. What emotions did you feel? What expectations? How has the Lord responded?

VERSE 16

Don't think of me as a wicked woman; I've been praying from the depth of my anguish and resentment."

The Hebrew words translated **don't think of** appear in a tense and construction that can mean "stop thinking what you're already thinking." In other words, Hannah realized that Eli had formed a hasty, poor opinion of her. He had passed judgment on her without knowing her true circumstances. The pronoun **me** literally reads "your maidservant" ("thine handmaid," KJV). It reflects Hannah's consistent humility and respect before Eli. He had misread her actions, but she nonetheless showed respect for him as God's priest. The Bible encourages us to respect our leaders since they will give account for their labors to God (Heb. 13:17). At the same time, leaders must lead with integrity, following the Lord's leading and providing good examples for others to follow (1 Pet. 5:2-3).

The expression **wicked woman** ("daughter of Belial," KJV; "worthless woman," ESV) describes one who strongly opposes God and His ways (1 Sam. 2:12; 1 Kings 21:13; compare 2 Cor. 6:15). The usage here is the only time in Scripture that it refers to a woman. The irony is that Hannah was at the Lord's sanctuary at Shiloh precisely because she faithfully worshiped the God of Israel. She did not oppose God and His ways; rather, through her prayer she submitted herself fully to Him.

The word translated **praying** literally means "speaking," but the context supports that Hannah was referring to prayer. Indeed, prayer at its core is speaking with God. Hannah's prayer was not casual; rather, she prayed **from the depth** (literally "abundance") **of [her] anguish and resentment**. The term rendered *anguish* also can mean "complaint" (KJV) or "anxiety"

(ESV). The word translated *resentment* also can mean “grief” (KJV, NIV) or “vexation” (ESV). Hannah found her inability to conceive a child frustrating, and that inability resulted in her anxiety and grief. She desperately wanted to give Elkanah a son and heir, and it was vexing when she could not. Hannah rightly took her troubled feelings to the Lord in prayer.

Sometimes Christians hesitate to take their deepest anxieties and doubts to God, but He can handle them. He already knows our hearts; therefore, we can and should speak honestly with Him. He has the power to help us endure our struggles or to deliver us from them.

VERSE 17

Eli responded, “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant the petition you’ve requested from Him.”

Eli realized he had misunderstood Hannah’s actions and, to his credit, changed his rebuke to a blessing. The word **peace** translates the Hebrew word *shalom* [shah LOHM]. It derives from a root word meaning “to be complete or whole.” Thus, to have *peace* is to experience completeness or fullness of life—life as God intended it to be.

The expression **God of Israel** highlighted God’s covenant relationship with His people. He was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen. 28:13). Indeed, God changed Jacob’s name to Israel (Gen. 32:28), and Israel’s tribes for the most part were named after Jacob’s sons. Interestingly, Hannah commonly referred to God as “the LORD” (that is, “Yahweh”), the name God had revealed to Moses as His personal, covenant name (Ex. 3:15). Some Bible students point to this fact as an illustration that Hannah’s relationship with God in reality was closer even than that of the priest Eli’s!

The words **petition** and **requested** derive from the same Hebrew root word, which has the basic meaning of “to ask” or “to inquire.” The word *requested* also appears in 1 Samuel 1:20 as an explanation of the meaning of the name Samuel. In the birth of her son Samuel, Hannah would receive precisely what she requested from the Lord.

VERSE 18

“May your servant find favor with you,” she replied. Then Hannah went on her way; she ate and no longer looked despondent.

Hannah continued to display humility and respect before Eli. The Hebrew word translated **favor** also can mean “grace” (KJV). Indeed, the word represents a short form of Hannah’s name. Hannah was in every respect a woman of grace. In the ultimate sense, God’s grace is His unmerited favor that He extends to sinners when they repent and believe in His Son Jesus

Christ (Eph. 2:8-9). Since Eli was God’s priest, Hannah sought divine favor through God’s authorized representative.

Eli’s blessing of peace changed Hannah’s entire countenance. The priest had now asked God to grant her request, so she **went on her way**. Previously she had wept bitterly and had refused to eat (1 Sam. 1:7); now her appetite returned, and **she ate**. Moreover, she **no longer looked despondent** (“her countenance was no more sad,” KJV). Hannah now had hope.

Believers today also need to remember the power that words can have, either to harm or to encourage. Parents can encourage children; teachers can encourage students; church leaders can encourage new believers. As we affirm others’ faith in God to meet their needs, we bless their lives and further motivate them to trust God in all circumstances.

HANNAH’S PRESENTATION (1 Sam. 1:26-28)

The Lord did indeed bless Hannah and granted her request for a son. At some point after the family returned from Shiloh to their home in Ramah [RAY muh], Hannah became pregnant. In due time she gave birth to a son, whom she named Samuel as a way of acknowledging the child as a gift from God (1 Sam. 1:19-20). Hannah raised her son and did not return with her husband to Shiloh for their annual pilgrimages until Samuel was old enough to live permanently at the sanctuary (1:21-25).

VERSE 26

“Please, my lord,” she said, “as sure as you live, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the LORD.

Bible students have debated Samuel’s age when his mother brought him to live permanently at the Shiloh sanctuary. One suggestion is that he was around three years old. This conclusion is based on the weaning practices of ancient tribal societies and the fact that the Hebrew word for “boy” in 1:24 can mean any age from infancy to marriageable age. The phrase “though the boy was still young” in 1:24 seems to point to the younger end of that age spectrum. In any case, Hannah stayed true to her vow and brought Samuel to Shiloh along with a generous offering to present to the Lord.

Hannah sought out Eli to testify how God had answered her prayer and the priest’s blessing on her. She addressed Eli with her usual attitudes of humility and respect: **“Please, my lord”** and **“as sure as you live, my lord.”** She reminded Eli of their encounter years earlier, calling to mind that she had been that **woman who stood here beside you praying to the LORD**. Perhaps many women came and prayed at Shiloh, but Hannah was sure Eli would remember the unusual circumstances that surrounded their meeting.

VERSES 27-28

I prayed for this boy, and since the LORD gave me what I asked Him for, I now give the boy to the LORD. For as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD.” Then he bowed in worship to the LORD there.

In the Hebrew construction, the phrase **for this boy** appears first, suggesting that Hannah’s emphasis was on God’s gift of a son and not on her ability to pray effectively. Indeed, Hannah testified that **the LORD gave me what I asked Him for**. God had answered her prayers to the fullest. In her darkest hour, she had taken her burden to Him and pleaded with Him to give her a son. She had vowed that if God would so bless her, she would **give the boy to the LORD** for a lifetime of special dedication and service. True to her word, she stood at Shiloh with Samuel her son, ready to fulfill her promise.

Hannah’s vow regarding Samuel was lifelong. She had vowed to God that if He gave her a son, she would give the boy to Him “all the days of his life” (1:11). She repeated that commitment with the words **for as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD**. Hannah would not go back on her vow.

The passage concludes with the statement that **he bowed in worship to the LORD there**. Presumably the *he* meant young Samuel. However, the feminine pronoun “she” appears in this statement in the 1 Samuel manuscript found among the Dead Sea scrolls. The “she” would be a reference to Hannah. Still other ancient manuscripts contain the plural pronoun “they,” suggesting that everyone involved responded in worship. Whatever the case, Samuel was introduced at an early age to the worship of the God of Israel. That experience laid a foundation for a life of fruitful ministry, just as it does for many believers today.

Believers today also can find great encouragement by keeping a prayer journal of God’s work in their lives. The journal provides a written record of God’s faithfulness on which they can draw in times of discouragement. It also can provide opportunities for parents to share their faith stories with their children as they lead them to follow the Lord.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Reflect on your spiritual journey. Recall a time when God answered a prayer you may have thought seemed impossible. How did it impact your faith when you received God’s answer? Take a moment to reflect on God’s favor in your life, and commit yourself to talking about it with at least one person this week.

CALLED

God delivers His message through His faithful followers.

I love teaching the Bible! For more than thirty years now, I have taught introductory Bible courses, advanced courses, and everything in between at the university where I am employed. One of the courses I teach is an advanced course on the Book of Isaiah. During the course, I always ask my students to read the entire Book of Isaiah (66 chapters) in one or at most two sittings, because doing so provides them a better overall understanding of the book's flow. One year, toward the end of the semester, a student told me, "This course has provided the best argument I know to keep reading the Bible." The student went on to point out how major themes (such as God's heart for the nations) became so apparent in a continuous reading.

The Bible gives many examples of God's people embracing the Scriptures. Ezra, a priest and scribe, committed himself to study the Word of God so that he could live by it and teach it to others (Ezra 7:10). The apostle Paul urged Timothy, his "son" in the faith, to cling to the Scriptures, reminding Timothy that he had been taught them since childhood and that the Scriptures were able to make him wise unto salvation (2 Tim. 3:14-15). The apostle Peter wrote that believers should pay attention to the Scriptures, because, like a lamp in the darkness, they give us God's revealed insight for living (2 Pet. 1:19-20).

This session focuses on Samuel's call to be a prophet of the Lord. The study highlights how God delivers His messages through His faithful followers. We need to sharpen our spiritual ears so that we can hear and obey God's message. God wants us grow in our spiritual lives and in our service to Him.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 SAMUEL 2:12-3:21

In Samuel's day, the Lord's sanctuary stood at Shiloh, an ancient city centrally located in the tribal area of Ephraim. Eli served as the sanctuary's chief priest. His two sons Hophni [HAHF nigh] and Phinehas [FIN ih huhs]

also served there as priests, overseeing the offering of sacrifices. Samuel had come to live at the sanctuary as well, having been brought there as a young boy by his parents in fulfillment of a vow (1 Sam. 1:24; 2:11).

Eli's sons were corrupt; they had no regard for the Lord or for His commands (2:12-17). They made up their own rules and claimed whatever portions of the sacrificial offerings they wanted. Further, they threatened worshipers who tried to offer their sacrifices according to the procedures given in the law. The two priests' actions were contemptible and sinful.

In contrast to Eli's wicked sons, young Samuel grew up in the Lord's presence (2:18-21). He served in the sanctuary and was allowed to wear a priestly garment. Samuel's parents visited him each year at the time of the annual sacrifice; on each occasion Eli spoke a blessing over the couple for more children. Indeed, the Lord eventually gave Elkanah and Hannah five more children as Samuel continued to grow up at Shiloh.

Because Eli's sons continued to sin blatantly, the Lord promised they would suffer His judgment; the priestly dynasty of Eli would one day come to an end (2:22-36). When Eli attempted to rebuke his sons for their immoral behavior and to warn them of the dire consequences, they ignored his warning. Later, a man of God came to Shiloh and delivered a prophecy against Eli and his priestly household. The Lord would send great distress on the sanctuary, and Eli's descendants would suffer violent deaths. The two sons Hophni and Phinehas would die on the same day. The Lord would then raise up "a faithful priest" who would obey His commands and "walk before [His] anointed one for all time" (2:35).

While it is tempting to view Samuel as the fulfillment of the promise of a faithful priest, 1 Samuel 3 reveals that Samuel instead became "a confirmed prophet of the LORD" (3:20). Indeed, the first prophetic message Samuel received from the Lord was a confirmation of the coming judgment against Eli's family. Thus, the promise in 2:35 more likely foreshadows the priestly line of Zadok [ZAY dahk], whom King David would establish as priest alongside Eli's descendant Abiathar [uh BIGH uh thahr] (2 Sam. 8:17). After David's death, Solomon banished Abiathar from being the Lord's priest, fulfilling in a final act the prophecy against Eli's family (1 Kings 2:27).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

A VOICE (1 Sam. 3:1-10)

Many Bible students have understood 1 Samuel 3 to describe Samuel's call to ministry or confirmation for ministry. As the chapter opens, Samuel

is described as “the boy” (Hebrew, *na’ar* [na AIR]); the chapter closes with Samuel’s being confirmed as “a prophet” (Hebrew, *nabi’* [nah BEE]). In 3:1-10, God spoke to Samuel while he was resting in the sanctuary. Once he understood that God was calling him, Samuel committed to listen to God.

VERSE 1

The boy Samuel served the LORD in Eli’s presence. In those days the word of the LORD was rare and prophetic visions were not widespread.

Exactly how old Samuel was at the time the Lord spoke to him is unclear. The Hebrew term translated **boy** (“child,” KJV) can designate a young male at any age from childhood to young adulthood. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus [joh SEE fuhs] stated that Samuel was 12 years of age at the time of his calling, yet he gave no evidence or source for the statement.

The word rendered **served** (“ministered,” KJV, NIV) also can be found in 2:11,18 describing Samuel’s duties at the sanctuary. The boy was not an indentured servant; this term was not used to describe slavery in any sense. Rather, the term designates a type of personal or ministry assistance such as Joshua performed for Moses (Josh. 1:1). It also can designate priestly service (Deut. 10:8; 1 Kings 8:11). That Samuel **served in Eli’s presence** indicates that Eli still acted as a mentor to the boy. Eli had taken responsibility for Samuel when Hannah presented her young son to him (1 Sam. 1:26-28).

In this context, the expression **the word of the LORD** designates revealed, spoken messages from God, not the written Scriptures of the time. (Probably the Law of Moses—Genesis through Deuteronomy—was the only written Scripture available at the time.) Such spoken messages from God were **rare** (“precious,” KJV). **Prophetic visions**, a related form of divine revelation, also were few and far between.

Why did God curtail His messages to His people? No reason is stated, but perhaps God withheld His messages because of the general corruption of the time. That is, the people and their spiritual leaders really did not want to hear from God. There were few people who had ears to hear what God had to say (see Isa. 6:9-10; compare Rev. 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22).

VERSE 2

One day Eli, whose eyesight was failing, was lying in his room.

The words translated **one day** (literally “in that day”) provide readers a hint that something was about to happen. Eli was a secondary observer to what would transpire, although his **eyesight was failing**. In the Hebrew text, the phrase literally states that “his eyes had begun to fail [so that] he was not able

to see.” His sight would continue to deteriorate with age, for in 1 Samuel 4:15 the biblical writer indicated that at age 98 Eli’s “gaze was fixed,” signifying complete blindness. However, Eli’s loss of physical sight pointed to an even more tragic deterioration—the loss of his spiritual insight. He was **lying in his room** (“in his place,” KJV) near the ark of God, but he was unable to hear the voice of God speaking. Someone else would have to hear it for Eli.

VERSE 3

Before the lamp of God had gone out, Samuel was lying down in the tabernacle of the LORD, where the ark of God was located.

The phrase **before the lamp of God had gone out** reveals the time of day. According to Exodus 27:21, the lamp in the sanctuary was to be kept burning “from evening until morning before the LORD.” At the same time, 1 Samuel 3:15 suggests that a bit of time remained between Samuel’s hearing God’s voice and the boy’s rising for the day. Consequently, the wording suggests a time a little before dawn.

Samuel was lying down, resting in preparation for the coming day. The Hebrew word rendered **tabernacle** literally means “temple”; it isn’t the same word used to designate the mobile structure the Israelites carried with them throughout the wilderness years. This could mean either that the original tabernacle furnishings had been placed in a more permanent structure at Shiloh or that some kind of additional structure had been built onto the original tabernacle. The **ark of God** is surely a reference to the ark of the covenant (see Ex. 25:10-22), for the Israelites under Joshua had “set up the tent of meeting” (which housed the ark) at Shiloh many years earlier (Josh. 18:1). The *ark of God* was a most sacred object; it represented God’s close presence with His people. Its mention in 1 Samuel 3:3 hinted that God was about to interact personally with His servant Samuel.

VERSE 4

Then the LORD called Samuel, and he answered, “Here I am.”

The LORD called Samuel. The text is clear that the sound was audible. Samuel didn’t imagine the voice or dream about it. He heard it and responded: “**Here I am.**” In speaking these words, Samuel responded just as Abraham and Moses had responded to the Lord’s audible voice long before (see Gen. 22:1; Ex. 3:4). Samuel’s response put him in good company!

Does God call to people in this way today? He certainly can if He chooses to do so. Clearly, though, He primarily speaks and calls individuals to Himself and to service today through His Word, whether written or taught. As people read the Bible and hear it taught or preached, they can respond to

it and surrender their lives to His leading. The Bible warns against receiving messages from self-proclaimed prophets who bring a distorted message (Deut. 13:1-4; Jer. 29:8-9; Matt. 7:15-23; 1 John 4:1-6). God's Word stands as the measure for any alleged spoken word. False teachers lead people astray, but the Bible will not.

VERSE 5

He ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." "I didn't call," Eli replied. "Go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

Although Samuel heard the voice speaking to him, he didn't detect its correct source at first. He assumed that his aging mentor had called for assistance, so he **ran to Eli**, using again the response "**Here I am.**" The added words "**you called me**" revealed Samuel's readiness to serve the elderly priest however he could and at whatever time of day or night he was needed.

Eli's response that he had not called must have surprised Samuel. Who else could have called if Samuel and Eli were the only ones in the sanctuary at that time? Eli's instruction for Samuel to **go back and lie down** only underscores the priest's diminished spiritual perception. It would take two more interruptions for Eli to realize what was occurring.

VERSE 6

Once again the LORD called, "Samuel!" Samuel got up, went to Eli, and said, "Here I am; you called me." "I didn't call, my son," he replied. "Go back and lie down."

Verse 4 does not specify the words God used when He first called Samuel. However, what the reader might have suspected was spoken previously is made plain in this verse. **The LORD called, "Samuel!"** Most people tend to be especially sensitive to hearing their own names called out. It is like having a personalized ring tone blare at the highest volume level in an otherwise silent auditorium. The piercing, echoing sound is impossible to ignore.

Consequently, Samuel was certain that Eli needed assistance and had called to him. He hurried to Eli's room and responded with the same words he had used before: "**Here I am; you called me.**"

Once again Eli failed to realize what was happening. He assured Samuel that he had not called. Eli addressed Samuel warmly as his **son**, suggesting the close, almost paternal, relationship that had developed between Eli and his young protégé. He urged Samuel again to **go back and lie down.**

It may seem easy to fault the mature, experienced priest at this point. However, even mature Christians today can experience times when they

struggle to discern God's calling or message for particular situations. Wise believers keep on reading God's Word. They also might seek counsel from other trusted believers and spiritual leaders. Sometimes God has a good purpose in allowing His people to take some time to discern His will. He may be refining the believer's spiritual insight, strengthening endurance, or building courage. In the end, however, God's people can be confident that God will reveal His wisdom and insight to them (see Jer. 29:11-13; 33:3).

VERSE 7

Now Samuel had not yet experienced the LORD, because the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

Lest the reader wonder why Samuel, like Eli, kept failing to understand the true source of the voice, the biblical writer inserted this explanation: **Samuel had not yet experienced the LORD** ("did not yet know the LORD," KJV, ESV, NIV). Samuel had surely heard about God in his early years with his parents and later under Eli's mentoring at Shiloh. Living and serving in the Lord's sanctuary, Samuel would have heard the great stories contained in the Scriptures about creation, the flood and Noah's ark, the faith of Abraham, Moses and the exodus, the sacrificial system, and the promised land.

However, Samuel had not yet begun to relate to the Lord at the level of one-to-one conversation (see Ex. 33:11). That is, **the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him**. No prior vision or voice had come from God to Samuel. Although he knew about the Lord from the Scriptures, Samuel had never heard the Lord speak personally to him. He had not received a prophetic message that he was responsible to declare on the Lord's behalf.

VERSE 8

Once again, for the third time, the LORD called Samuel. He got up, went to Eli, and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli understood that the LORD was calling the boy.

The Lord persisted in His purpose, calling to Samuel **for the third time**. As in the two previous times, however, Samuel thought the voice calling to him was Eli's. And as before, Samuel **went to Eli, and said, "Here I am; you called me."** By this time, the careful reader has become truly impressed by Samuel's determination to serve his aging, sightless mentor.

For Eli, *the third time* was the clincher. It's probably safe to assume that Eli hadn't previously known Samuel to hear a voice in the night. Further, Eli knew for certain he had not called Samuel. Eli's spiritual dimness at last cleared enough for him to realize **the LORD was calling the boy**.

VERSE 9

He told Samuel, “Go and lie down. If He calls you, say, ‘Speak, LORD, for Your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Having finally realized the Lord had spoken to Samuel, Eli instructed the young boy to **go and lie down** once more. If the voice called again, Samuel was to respond: **“Speak, LORD, for Your servant is listening.”**

Eli’s recommended prayer-response provides a good model prayer for all who seek to know and obey God’s will. Indeed, we as believers need to be quick to heed God’s voice expressed by the commands in His Word. Having this brief prayer on our lips as we read the Bible can help us discern His will and prepare us to obey what He reveals.

Samuel dutifully obeyed Eli’s guidance. He **went and lay down in his place**. Perhaps he lay fidgeting on his mat, wide-eyed with excitement, wondering what the Sovereign God of the universe might want to say to him.

VERSE 10

The LORD came, stood there, and called as before, “Samuel, Samuel!” Samuel responded, “Speak, for Your servant is listening.”

Not only did the Lord speak to Samuel, He also **came, stood there, and called as before**. The phrase **stood there** can indicate either a visionary appearance or a theophany [thee AHF uh nih], a visible manifestation of God in a temporarily assumed human form. In either case, the Lord wanted Samuel to experience His close presence in a life-changing way.

This time the Lord uttered Samuel’s name twice: **“Samuel, Samuel!”** The twofold address likely indicates divine urgency, as it did for Abraham on the mountain of testing (Gen. 22:11), for Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:4), and for Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:4). Samuel was ready to hear and obey, referring to himself as the Lord’s **servant**. The word rendered *servant* is from a different root word than the term appearing in 1 Samuel 3:1 (see the discussion of 3:1 on p. 22). The term in 3:10 can mean “slave.” In the Septuagint [sep TOO uh jint], an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Greek term used in 3:10 is the same one the apostle Paul later used to refer to himself as a “slave” of Jesus Christ (see Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1).

Samuel was prepared to learn and embrace the calling for which God had brought him into the world. Samuel’s mother, Hannah, had prayed earnestly for a son to end her barrenness with its accompanying taunts by others. The Lord granted Hannah’s prayer; yet He had an even greater purpose in mind for her son Samuel. Indeed, God’s message to Samuel would announce a

turning point in Samuel's life, in the future of the priest Eli's family, and in God's purposes for Israel as a people.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Call, Calling" on pages 253-254 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. In what ways have you sensed God's calling on your life? How have you responded to God's call?

A MESSAGE (1 Sam. 3:17-18)

First Samuel 3:11-16 describes the first prophetic message the Lord revealed to Samuel and the initial fear Samuel felt about delivering it. The message was a reiteration of the judgment oracle against Eli's family in 2:27-34. As Samuel opened the sanctuary doors in the morning after receiving the message, he "was afraid to tell Eli the vision" (3:15). Nevertheless, when Eli called for his assistant, Samuel responded in his usual way, saying, "Here I am" (3:16).

VERSE 17

"What was the message He gave you?" Eli asked. "Don't hide it from me. May God punish you and do so severely if you hide anything from me that He told you."

Eli asked Samuel about the nature and content of **the message** God had revealed to him. Evidently, Eli suspected the message was bad news for him and his sons, yet he wanted to hear every detail. He urged Samuel not to **hide it from** him, invoking an oath that called for God to **punish** [Samuel] ... **severely** if any part of the message was omitted.

Eli's oath may sound to modern ears like a harsh threat from a cranky old priest to a young boy. Behind the oath, however, was an urging to fulfill the prophetic calling. A true prophet was (and is) responsible to speak the precise message God had given him—boldly and regardless of circumstances (Deut. 18:18-20). Sadly, false prophets and teachers throughout history have spoken what they think people want to hear (see Jer. 6:13-14; 2 Tim. 4:2-4).

VERSE 18

So Samuel told him everything and did not hide anything from him. Eli responded, "He is the LORD. He will do what He thinks is good."

Samuel **told** [Eli] **everything and did not hide anything from him**. Eli had heard the message previously from an unidentified “man of God” (1 Sam. 2:27-34). Now he had received the same prophetic message from the mouth of his young protégé. The Lord had spoken; the time of judgment had come.

Eli’s response (“**He is the LORD. He will do what He thinks is good.**”) revealed that Eli knew he could do nothing now except submit to God’s judgment. The Lord had the full perspective on all that was happening in Eli’s family and in Israel. Eli acknowledged God’s sovereignty over the entire situation. The Lord would end the priesthood of unfaithful priests and would raise up a faithful one.

As believers, we too can trust in God’s sovereignty. Regardless of how conditions seem to us, we can trust that God sees things with complete clarity. He is able to work all things in our lives together for His glorious purpose (Rom. 8:28).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Prophecy, Prophets” on pages 1333-1336 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. In what ways do faithful Bible preachers and teachers fulfill the role of prophet today?

A PROPHET (1 Sam. 3:19-21)

Verses 19-21 summarize Samuel’s early ministry as a prophet of the Lord. Because all of Samuel’s prophecies were fulfilled, he was recognized throughout Israel as a true prophet.

VERSE 19

Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him, and He fulfilled everything Samuel prophesied.

The words **Samuel grew** echo 2:21 and the biblical writer’s emphasis on Samuel’s continuing physical and spiritual growth as he prepared to embrace the fullness of God’s purpose for his life. The phrase **the LORD was with him** indicates that God was pleased with Samuel and continued to reveal His prophetic messages to Samuel, who faithfully proclaimed them.

In the Hebrew text, the words **He fulfilled everything Samuel prophesied** literally read: “[The Lord] did not let fall any of his words to the ground.” Prophetic words that fell to the ground lacked power; they were empty and false. God imbued Samuel’s words with truth and power. All of Samuel’s prophetic messages came to pass, because God brought them to pass.

VERSE 20

All Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a confirmed prophet of the LORD.

In his early ministry, Samuel lived and served at the Lord's sanctuary at Shiloh. The expression **from Dan to Beer-sheba** [bee ehr-SHEE buh] designated Israel's northernmost and southernmost borders, respectively. Thus, Samuel's reputation as a **confirmed** ("was established," KJV; "was attested," NIV) **prophet of the LORD** quickly extended among Israelites throughout the promised land.

The Hebrew term translated *confirmed* comes from the same root word as the term that means "amen." The root meaning is "to be confirmed, sure, or certain." In other words, the people had no doubt Samuel was a true prophet.

VERSE 21

The LORD continued to appear in Shiloh, because there He revealed Himself to Samuel by His word.

Since the time of Joshua, the tabernacle had stood at the centrally located town of **Shiloh** (Josh. 18:1). It was there that the people had assembled to be officially granted their tribal lands (Josh. 19:51). Sadly, Shiloh later became a place of idolatry and intertribal conflict (Judg. 18:31; 21:10-25). Moreover, although centrally located, Shiloh was difficult to defend from attack (as the Israelites soon would experience).

The Lord's continuing presence, represented by the tabernacle and the ark in particular (see Ex. 25:21-22), guaranteed that Shiloh would remain a place of worship and divine guidance. As God **revealed Himself to Samuel by His word**, Samuel grew as God's prophet and in relationship to Him. God's people saw God's hand resting on Samuel and submitted to His leading.

Even so, as we today submit ourselves to God's leadership through godly leaders, we can expect God's guiding hand to be on us. Living the Christian life apart from the presence of the Holy Spirit is impossible (Rom. 8:7-8). His great work begins when we repent of our sins, place our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and submit to His calling.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Samuel" on pages 1439-1440 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What lessons can we learn from Samuel about faithful, godly leadership?

WORTHY!

Only God is worthy of worship and praise.

Some people contend that it doesn't matter what people believe about God as long as they are sincere in their beliefs. The problem with that assertion is obvious: sincerity alone cannot make a wrong belief true. Such a "believer" is simply sincerely wrong. And the consequences of sincerely wrong beliefs can be harmful, even deadly!

When the Israelites settled in the promised land, they did not drive out all of the pagan groups from all of the tribal regions. Thus, they found themselves constantly challenged by these groups—militarily and spiritually. That is, the pagan groups worshiped idols, multiple deities that were believed to control every aspect of life. There were fertility gods that ruled the rains as well as human reproduction. There were gods of war and gods of wealth, gods of fire and gods of death. Against those false ideas, the Israelites were bound in a covenant to the one true God. The question was whether they would resist the temptations of pagan beliefs and cling faithfully to the Lord God.

The Bible passage for this session highlights a dramatic confrontation between the one true God and Dagon [DAY gahn], a primary deity of the Philistines. Studying this passage will remind us of two important truths. First, whether in ancient times or today, God's people can expect to face challenges to their belief in the one true God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (see Eph. 1:3). Second, the unchanging, unimpeachable truth is that only the one true God is worthy of human beings' worship and highest praise. He is the Sovereign Creator, Redeemer, and King.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 SAMUEL 4:1–7:17

Samuel had a multifaceted ministry in Israel. As a boy serving at the Lord's sanctuary at Shiloh (where the ark was located), he wore a linen garment, a symbol of the priesthood (2:18). After the Lord revealed a prophetic message

to the young man, Samuel was soon recognized throughout Israel as a true prophet (3:20). Historically speaking, Samuel lived during the last years of the time of the judges. Judges were tribal heroes (think Deborah, Gideon, Samson) whom the Lord raised up to deliver His people from oppression brought on as judgment for spiritual rebellion (see Judg. 2:16-19). Indeed, a case can be made that Samuel was the last judge in Israel, since he is referred to as having “judged Israel throughout his life” (1 Sam. 7:15) and led—albeit reluctantly—the people to establish the monarchy (10:24-25).

First Samuel 4–7 chronicles a period during Samuel’s adult years marked by Israel’s conflict with the Philistines. The Philistines inhabited the coastal area along Judah’s western tribal territory; they were ruled by five warlord-kings in the cities of Ashdod, Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron. No other pagan group gave the Israelites more grief and defeat during this period than did the Philistines.

Chapter 4 opens with the Philistine army overwhelming the Israelites in a battle near Aphek [AY fek], killing four thousand Israelite soldiers (4:1-2). This prompted Israel’s leaders to send the ark into the battle to encourage the remaining troops and to guarantee victory, but the plan backfired. Israel lost thirty thousand more soldiers in a follow-up battle, the two priests Hophni and Phinehas were slain, and the ark was captured by the Philistines (4:3-11). When news of the catastrophe reached Shiloh, Eli the priest fell backward off a stool, breaking his neck and dying. His pregnant daughter-in-law went into labor from shock and died just after giving birth (4:12-22).

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the captured ark and the confrontation between the Lord God of Israel and Dagon, the god of the Philistines. The ark was first taken to Ashdod and placed in the temple of Dagon next to the god’s statue (5:1-2). But the priests there kept finding the statue fallen over as though bowing before the ark (5:3-5). In addition, the Lord afflicted the people of Ashdod with tumors, leading the citizens to demand the ark be taken elsewhere (5:6-7). Yet when it was moved to Gath and later to Ekron, similar disasters occurred (5:8-10). Finally the Philistines concluded that the God of Israel would not relent until the ark was returned to the Israelites (5:11-12).

The Philistine leaders devised a plan to return the ark (along with a restitution offering) to Israel by means of a cow-drawn cart (6:1-18). The cows pulled the cart without human guidance to Beth-shemesh [beth-SHEM mesh], where the ark was stationed on a large rock. Later God struck down 70 men of Beth-shemesh because they looked inside the ark. The ark was then moved to Kiriath-jearim [KIHR ih ath-JEE uh rim], where it remained for many years (6:19–7:1).

In chapter 7, the focus returns to Samuel and to Israel’s conflict with the Philistines, picking up with events some twenty years after the ark’s return.

Samuel led the Israelites in a time of repentance and renewal (7:1-6). During a worship gathering at Mizpah for all the Israelites, the Philistines saw their opportunity to destroy Israel. Because of Samuel's intercessory prayer, however, the Lord threw the Philistines into confusion, and the Israelites routed their enemy (7:7-11). The Philistines did not invade Israel's territory again for the rest of Samuel's life (7:12-14). Samuel lived in his family hometown of Ramah and settled into a ministry of judging Israel on a circuit of key towns (7:15-17).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE HOLY GOD (1 Sam. 5:1-5)

The focus in 1 Samuel 5 is on God's holiness. As God would later declare through the prophet Isaiah: "I am Yahweh, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another or My praise to idols" (Isa. 42:8).

VERSE 1

After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod,

The Philistines **had captured the ark of God** in a battle with the Israelites near Aphek [AY fek], along the western border of the tribal territory of Ephraim (4:11). In the Philistines' mindset, capturing the ark meant they had defeated not only Israel's army—thirty thousand Israelite soldiers were killed—but also Israel's God (4:6-8). So the Philistines proudly carted off their new trophy from the decimated Israelite encampment at **Ebenezer** and carried it **to Ashdod**, a key Philistine city with a temple dedicated to Dagon [DAY gahn]. Archaeological evidence suggests that the Philistines pushed farther into Israelite territory after this battle, destroying even the city of Shiloh and the Lord's sanctuary (see Jer. 7:12-14).

VERSE 2

brought it into the temple of Dagon and placed it next to his statue.

The Philistines proceeded to bring the ark **into the temple of Dagon**. Language scholars have noted that the name *Dagon* may be related to either of the Hebrew words for fish (*dag*) or corn (*dagan*). Thus, suggestions about the nature of this pagan deity range from its being a god of the sea to its being a storm god or agricultural (fertility) god. In any case, that the judgment

of God later fell upon the Philistine people as well as on their grain fields highlights how powerless the idol of Dagon was against the one true God.

The Philistines worshiped idols of their deities, a practice the Lord specifically prohibited for His people (see Ex. 20:4-6). The ark was not an idol, a representation of God, but rather a place where God decreed He would meet with His people and reveal His will to them (Ex. 25:21-22). The Philistines, on the other hand, connected their idol with the god himself. Thus, when they brought the ark into the temple of Dagon and **placed it next to his statue** (“by Dagon,” KJV; “beside Dagon,” ESV, NIV), they believed that Israel’s God was now subservient to Dagon. The Philistines were in for a rude awakening!

VERSE 3

When the people of Ashdod got up early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen with his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and returned him to his place.

The **people of Ashdod** made a startling discovery the next day. The statue of **Dagon** (thus their god) had **fallen with his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD**. How had the idol fallen? The text does not provide this detail, but the inference clearly was what Isaiah later wrote concerning the futility of idolatry: “He makes a god or his idol ... He bows down to it and worships; He prays to it, ‘Save me, for you are my god.’ Such people do not comprehend and cannot understand ... His deceived mind has led him astray” (Isa. 44:17-18,20). That which the Philistines worshiped as their god had fallen prostrate on its own before the God of Israel!

Because idolatry—then and now—is the product of a deceived mind, the Philistines ignored the meaning of what they saw. Instead of opening their eyes to the truth, they **took Dagon and returned him to his place**. However, the Lord was not finished making His point.

VERSE 4

But when they got up early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen with his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. This time, both Dagon’s head and the palms of his hands were broken off and lying on the threshold. Only Dagon’s torso remained.

The next day the Philistines arrived at their temple only to find the idol of Dagon again lying prostrate **before the ark of the LORD**. This time, however, the Lord’s assertion of His sovereignty and Dagon’s powerlessness was even more apparent. The idol’s **head and ... hands were broken off and lying on the threshold**. Dagon couldn’t protect his own statue, much less the people

who worshiped it! That the severed pieces were *lying on the threshold* signified that this false god had no real wisdom (*head*) or capacity to act (*hands*). That the idol's **torso** once again lay in a position of humiliation and subservience before the ark should have been a clear sign to the Philistines as to the unseen hand at work. It was sovereign hand of the true and living God!

We shouldn't overlook an amazing truth about God revealed in this incident. In His plan to rescue Israel not only from the Philistines but also from their own spiritual rebellion, the Lord allowed His ark to be taken into the enemy camp, enduring taunts that Israel's God was defeated. Then in the very temple of the Philistines' false worship, the Lord asserted His sovereignty. He defeated the real enemies of His creation and of His people. Sound familiar? It should for believers. This incident foreshadows the eternal victory God won in sending Jesus Christ into a fallen world to defeat forever sin, death, and the Devil (see 1 Cor. 15:54-57).

VERSE 5

That is why, to this day, the priests of Dagon and everyone who enters the temple of Dagon in Ashdod do not step on Dagon's threshold.

The biblical writer showed in this verse how the Philistines rejected the truth and mired themselves even deeper in idolatry. The expression **to this day** refers to the time when 1 Samuel was written, perhaps more than a hundred years after the incident in Dagon's temple. At that time, the people of Ashdod evidently still worshiped an idol in **the temple of Dagon**.

As a result of what occurred in Ashdod in Samuel's day, however, **the priests of Dagon** began a practice of disallowing themselves or any worshiper to **step on Dagon's threshold**. In other words, they ignored the true message of the incident and redefined it to perpetuate their false worship. Likely they taught that the *threshold* had been made holy by the broken pieces of the idol that came to rest there. To their detriment, they ignored the One who is truly holy and who alone is worthy of worship.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Dagon" on page 380 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What are some examples of false worship (idolatry) that you see occurring today? Why do you think it is so difficult for people to admit they are worshipping a false god and turn from idolatry to worship the one true God?

JUDGMENT EXPERIENCED (1 Sam. 5:6)

God had displayed His power over Dagon in the temple at Ashdod. He would now execute His judgment against the people of the city.

VERSE 6

The LORD's hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod, terrorizing and afflicting the people of Ashdod and its territory with tumors.

The expression **the LORD's hand** signifies God's active judgment (see also 5:7,9,11; compare Ex. 9:3). The phrase **was heavy** indicates the severity of judgment that came on **the people of Ashdod**. Terror seized the citizens as an outbreak of **tumors** ("emerods," KJV) swept throughout the city and spread to the surrounding villages. The root meaning of the Hebrew term rendered *tumors* probably is "to swell." Thus, some Bible students conclude the Lord struck the people of Ashdod with an infectious disease that produced painful buboes—in other words, bubonic plague.

This conclusion finds some support in the fact that the Septuagint (an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) includes these words in the verse: "[God] brought up mice against them, and they swarmed in their ships." (Flea-ridden mice helped spread an outbreak of bubonic plague in the 14th century A.D. that killed an estimated fifty million people!) Additional support for identifying the scourge as bubonic plague can be seen in the Philistines' restitution offering of five gold tumors and five gold mice along with the ark (1 Sam. 6:4-5). In any event, the people of Ashdod failed to recognize God as holy; consequently, they experienced a divinely initiated plague.

When the people of Ashdod had seen enough, they sent the ark to Gath, another of the Philistine key cities (5:8-9). A similar outbreak of tumors occurred there, so the ark was sent to yet another city, Ekron (5:10-12). The people of Ekron panicked when the ark appeared in their city and demanded that the Philistine rulers send it back "to its place" in Israel. Thus, a plan was worked out to either rid themselves of the ark or prove the Lord was not the source of the devastating plague (6:1-9).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Divine Retribution" on pages 434-435 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. How do you evaluate whether a natural disaster or widespread calamity may also be a form of divine judgment? What form of divine retribution is even more serious than calamities such as natural disasters or plagues? Explain.

INSTRUCTIONS FOLLOWED (1 Sam. 6:11-12)

The Philistines devised an unusual means of discerning whether or not Israel's God had afflicted them. They planned to place the ark and accompanying offerings on a new cart. The cart was to be pulled by two milk cows that had never been yoked together and that had recently given birth to calves. The cart was to be sent away without a human escort. If the cows failed to return to the pens where their calves were kept and traveled instead toward Israel, then the Philistines would know their affliction had come from the Lord.

VERSE 11

Then they put the ark of the LORD on the cart, along with the box containing the gold mice and the images of their tumors.

In accordance with the plan devised by their priests and diviners, the Philistines **put the ark of the LORD on the cart**. The accompanying offering of **gold mice and the images of their tumors** may appear strange to modern readers. However, many ancient societies practiced such customs. The rituals were a form of imitative magic designed to appease the gods.

The Philistines used their pagan religious traditions to show their repentance and reverence before God, whom they didn't worship but certainly wanted to appease. The Lord God had given precise instructions in the law to His people regarding how they should worship Him. In the New Testament, believers are encouraged to pray, to meet regularly with other Christians, and to sing praises to the Lord (Acts 2:42; Eph. 5:19; Heb. 10:25). In addition, the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper are means by which gathered congregations of believers offer worship to the Triune God.

The Philistines wanted to send the ark away as an effort to get rid of God. However, the Bible calls people to worship only the one true God. We need to incorporate into our lives attitudes and actions that demonstrate our conviction that God and God alone is worthy of our worship.

VERSE 12

The cows went straight up the road to Beth-shemesh. They stayed on that one highway, lowing as they went; they never strayed to the right or to the left. The Philistine rulers were walking behind them to the territory of Beth-shemesh.

The Philistines must have been amazed when **the cows went straight up the road to Beth-shemesh**. The city of *Beth-shemesh*—its name means “house of the sun”—was at this time a significant Levitical city (see Josh. 21:16) that overlooked a valley running between Israelite- and Philistine-

dominated territories. Some three hundred years later, during the reign of Judah's immoral King Ahaz (735–715 B.C.), Beth-shemesh and several other key towns in the region fell under Philistine control as a punishment from God (2 Chron. 28:18-19). At this time, however, for the ark to return to Beth-shemesh meant that it was going back to Israel by their God's decree. The Philistines surely watched with wonder as the two cows, bawling for their newborn calves, **never strayed to the right or to the left**. The conclusion for **the Philistine rulers** was clear: the Lord God had brought disaster on the Philistines; it had not happened merely "by chance" (1 Sam. 6:9).

The Philistines had seen God demonstrate His power through judgment and through steering the ark-bearing cart back to Israel. Sadly, we have no evidence that the Philistines ever turned from their idolatry and spiritual darkness to God. Even with clear evidence of God's sovereignty and grace (presumably the plagues ended), the Philistines wanted nothing to do with the one true God. Like many people before and since, they "loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19).

The university where I teach seeks to help people incarcerated in prison, including offering inmates opportunities to take classes. A female inmate taking one of the classes I teach once said to me, "I praise the Lord for delivering me from a life of drug addiction. He did that by getting me sent to prison." She realized, of course, that her pain and loss of freedom were of her own doing, but she also saw God's grace transforming her incarceration into a means of deliverance from self-destruction.

EXPLORE FURTHER

When have you known the Lord to use a loss or disaster—either in your life or in a Christian friend's life—to become a means of help and deliverance? What do such transformations tell us about God's power? About God's grace?

WORSHIP OFFERED (1 Sam. 6:13-16)

VERSE 13

The people of Beth-shemesh were harvesting wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they were overjoyed to see it.

As a Levitical city, **Beth-shemesh** was home to a particular family of Levites descended from Moses' brother, Aaron. In the wilderness period, this family

had been tasked to care for and transport holy objects, including the ark (see Josh. 21:10,16; compare Num. 4:4,15). These priestly assistants knew what to do with the ark and how to treat it. It was never to be touched directly.

The people of Beth-shemesh likely did not expect to see what they saw that day. The ark had been in Philistine hands for seven months (6:1), but life in Israel had gone on. It was early summer (our months of May–June), the dry season, and the farmers **were harvesting wheat in the valley**. When the harvest was done, the people would celebrate the Feast of Weeks, also known as Pentecost (Lev. 23:15-21). Grateful worshipers would bring offerings of their firstfruits to the Lord’s sanctuary for a time of thanksgiving and feasting. This year, however, the Israelites surely wondered how they could possibly celebrate without the ark in its place.

Imagine, then, the reaction of the harvesters **when they looked up and saw the ark** coming toward them aboard a cart pulled by two unguided cows. **They were overjoyed** (“they rejoiced at the sight,” NIV)! The sight sent a clear message to the people of Israel: The Israelite army might have suffered defeat and Israel’s tribes might be discouraged, but the God of Israel was in control.

VERSE 14

The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh and stopped there near a large rock. The people of the city chopped up the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD.

The identity of **Joshua of Beth-shemesh** is unknown, as is the location of **the field** where the cart came to a stop **near a large rock**. In all likelihood, these details were included simply to indicate that the cows had fulfilled the sign the Philistines had wanted to see (6:7-9). However, **the people of the city** of Beth-shemesh immediately decided to celebrate the unexpected event with an impromptu worship service. They **chopped up the cart** for firewood and **offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD**.

Unexpected blessings also provide great opportunities for us as believers to testify of God’s worthiness. When God brings such blessings into our lives, we need to pause and thank Him. Is there an unexpected blessing for which you, your family, or your church need to stop and worship?

VERSE 15

The Levites removed the ark of the LORD, along with the box containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. That day the men of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the LORD.

The law was explicit that no ordinary Israelite, not even the Levitical caretakers, could touch the ark directly—on pain of death (Num. 4:15; 2 Sam. 6:6-7). Yet the text in 1 Samuel 6:15 suggests no wrongdoing when **the Levites removed the ark of the LORD** and stationed it, **along with the box containing the gold objects, ... on the large rock**. Two possibilities could explain this situation. First, it is possible the Levites' handling of the ark was carried out strictly according to the law, and the biblical writer did not need to describe the full process. Second, the Lord may have acted with great mercy in this instance in light of the people's desire to honor Him with **burnt offerings and ... sacrifices** in view of the ark's miraculous return.

VERSE 16

When the five Philistine rulers observed this, they returned to Ekron that same day.

The **five Philistine rulers** watched all that was happening at Beth-shemesh. In observing the Israelite worship service, they saw further evidence of God's sovereignty, saving power, and mercy. Still, however, their hearts were not changed concerning the Lord. They simply **returned to Ekron** and to their idolatrous ways and hostility toward God's people.

Ironically, the ark's return also did not end well for some of the people of Beth-shemesh (1 Sam. 6:19-21). They treated the ark irreverently by looking inside. God punished the wrongdoers, striking down 70 men and resulting in the ark's being moved to another town.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that "no one can be a slave of two masters, since either he will hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. [People] cannot be slaves of God and of money" (Matt. 6:24). This study has reminded us that anything we place before or equal to the Lord is an idol. Ultimately it will topple, and we will suffer as well. God is holy. He and He alone is worthy of our praise. Indeed, He is worthy of our very best in worship.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Sacrifice and Offering" on pages 1428-1432 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What did Israel's sacrificial system express about God's worthiness and holiness? How can believers today know what is acceptable worship? How can you give to the Lord the very best in your worship?

KING?

Only God is worthy of being looked to as the Ruler of His people and of His creation.

When I was in elementary school, I wanted to be just like my friend, whom I will refer to as “Tom.” Tom stood a little taller and stronger than most of us boys. Whenever we chose teams for kickball, Tom always got selected first. He seemed to always wear the latest brand-name clothes. (In all honesty, that fact aroused a bit of jealousy in me.) If I asked my parents for the newest brand of sneakers, insisting that all the kids had them, then my parents would ask me: “Who are three of your classmates—not including Tom—who have those shoes?” Usually that question put an end to my request!

As I grew older, I realized that I did not want to be exactly like my childhood friend after all. Tom began to have serious problems in school as well as problems outside of school with the law. He didn’t prove to be a good role model for me. Instead, I began to watch and emulate the actions of some older students who were Christians. They proved to be much better role models for me in important ways, including in my relationship to Christ.

This session focuses on how the Israelite elders approached Samuel to clamor for a king. They wanted a king because all the surrounding nations had kings. Yet in asking for a king the Israelites were rejecting God’s kingship. Despite Samuel’s warnings, God gave His people what they requested.

The New Testament encourages God’s people to submit to their earthly leaders. According to Scripture, God is the ultimate Ruler who gives authority to human leaders. Thus, we need to pray for our government leaders regularly (Rom. 13:1-2,4; 1 Tim. 2:1-4). God likewise has placed pastors and other church leaders in positions of spiritual leadership in the body of Christ, and we need to pray for our spiritual leaders as well (Heb. 13:17). Leaders often face great challenges; when we support them and pray for them, they are better able to lead us as God directs them.

As you study today’s session, take a moment to pray for national and local leaders, whomever they may be. Ask the Lord to guide them in what He has called them to do. Circumstances may tempt us to take matters into our own hands, but we can trust God to provide godly leaders in His timing.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 SAMUEL 8:1–11:15

These four chapters describe a pivotal transition in Israel's history. Chapter 8 opens with a strong indication that the tribal system of leadership by judges would end with Samuel. Samuel's sons, like Eli the priest's sons in the previous generation, turned out to be corrupt. They "turned toward dishonest gain, took bribes, and perverted justice" (8:3)—exactly the opposite of what God's law demanded from Israel's leaders (see Ex. 23:6-8). The transition began in earnest after the tribal elders approached Samuel and demanded that he appoint a king for Israel (1 Sam. 8:4-22). They wanted the nation to be like all the surrounding nations. Reluctantly—and only after the Lord specifically guided him—Samuel agreed to give the elders what they demanded. At the same time, he warned them that having a human king would cost them dearly in terms of people and treasure.

Chapters 9–10 describe the identification, anointing, and official selection of Saul as Israel's first king. Two interweaving themes dominate these chapters. First is the portrait of Saul, especially as to his fitness to be king. He was a physically impressive man, standing a head taller than any other Israelite (9:2; 10:23). Yet he was a poor herdsman (9:3-5); he lived near but had never heard of Israel's leading judge and prophet, Samuel; and he lacked confidence to the point of hiding from the people looking for their new king (9:21; 10:16,21-22). This ambivalent portrait of Saul in chapters 9–10 was consistent with the questions hanging over the kingship itself.

A second theme in chapters 9–10 is the Lord's sovereign hand over the history of His covenant people. The Lord guided the flow of Israel's history toward His greater purpose, sometimes from behind the scenes. He informed Samuel that Saul—the Lord's choice to be Israel's ruler—would come to see the prophet on a particular day (9:15-16). The Spirit of the Lord would come on Saul after his anointing and would empower him to prophesy, thus adding to Saul's reputation as a chosen leader (10:6,10). The Lord providentially guided the selection process at Mizpah that elevated Saul as king (10:17-24). The people disobeyed God in demanding a king simply to be like other nations (10:19), but the Lord did not forsake His place as their true King (10:25-26).

Chapter 11 describes Saul's confirmation as Israel's king. When Saul learned that the people of Jabesh-gilead were under threat from the Ammonites, he followed the Spirit's guidance and mustered over three hundred thousand Israelite troops. Saul's army destroyed the Ammonite invaders (11:1-11). In light of Saul's victory, Samuel called all the Israelites together at Gilgal to reaffirm both the kingship and Saul as their king (11:12-15).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

A KING DEMANDED (1 Sam. 8:4-5)

Samuel realized as he grew old that a new generation of leaders would be needed. He appointed his two sons as judges, but they proved to be rebellious and corrupt (8:1-3). The leadership crisis quickly reached a tipping point.

VERSE 4

So all the elders of Israel gathered together and went to Samuel at Ramah.

The elders of Israel took a leadership role in representing their respective tribes. They **gathered together** to present a united voice to their respected, elderly leader, Samuel. It's fair to assume *the elders* were well aware of—and perhaps were victims of—his sons' ungodly practices. Evidently the elders had been discussing among themselves for some time the growing problem and what could be done. When they **went to Samuel at Ramah** [RAY muh], they carried with them a demand that would change Israelite society.

The city of *Ramah* was located in the tribal territory of Benjamin. It was Samuel's home, although he periodically journeyed to other cities in the region to judge Israel (7:15-17). All of the Israelite tribes affirmed Samuel's prophetic gift and leadership ability (3:21), but the central tribal regions may have been where Samuel's godly reputation and influence were strongest.

VERSE 5

They said to him, “Look, you are old, and your sons do not follow your example. Therefore, appoint a king to judge us the same as all the other nations have.”

Nothing in the elders' words suggests they did not appreciate Samuel's long and faithful leadership. In fact, they wanted Samuel to take the lead in making the transition to a monarchy. Thus, the phrase **you are old** likely showed no disrespect but rather acknowledged—as Samuel himself had acknowledged by appointing his sons as judges—that the elderly prophet-judge would not live forever. Further, the elders' declaration **your sons do not follow your example** put the onus of failure squarely on Samuel's sons. Samuel had set a godly example of leadership; his sons had chosen to go the way of wickedness.

The word translated **therefore** (literally “now”) often appears in Old Testament speeches when speakers arrive at the bottom line of what they

want to say (see Gen. 44:33; Josh. 24:14). The word marks a transition from the indicative to the imperative, from a description of what is to a demand for new action. Given Samuel's advancing age and his sons' deeply flawed character, the elders demanded that Samuel **appoint a king to judge** the tribes. They wanted more than replacements for two corrupt judges. They wanted a new kind of governance, a centralized leadership that ultimately rested on one person—a *king*.

Where had the elders gotten such an idea? They saw that **all the other nations** around them had kings. The problem was, though, God had specifically commanded Israel to be a holy nation, distinct from the other nations. The Israelites' allegiance was to be to God alone as their King (Lev. 20:26; Ps. 29:10; compare 1 Tim. 1:17). At the same time, God knew the day would come when Israel would set up a monarchy; He even gave instructions in the law to that end (Deut. 17:14-20). Thus, the elders' demand did not take God by surprise, but it set an ominous tone regarding the people's loyalty to their true King. Did the people want to obey the Lord and be like Him in their holy living, or did they just want to be like everybody else? That was a crucial question for the Israelites in Samuel's day. It is no less important a question for the followers of Christ today. Who owns our highest loyalty?

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "King, Kingship" on pages 985-987 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What factors led to the Israelites' demand for a king? How can believers today follow Christ as their true King while also submitting to the human leaders who have authority over them?

REJECTION DECLARED (1 Sam. 8:6-9)

VERSE 6

When they said, "Give us a king to judge us," Samuel considered their demand sinful, so he prayed to the LORD.

Samuel took no offense at the elders' comments concerning his age or his sons' lack of fitness to lead. However, their demand for **a king to judge** them was another matter! **Samuel considered their demand sinful** ("the thing displeased Samuel," KJV, ESV). The Hebrew word translated *sinful* can mean "be evil" or "be bad." The term rendered *considered* literally is "in eyes of [Samuel]." The text here does not go so far as to say the demand was sinful in God's eyes, yet God's faithful prophet concluded that it was (see 12:17).

The demand for a king evidently raised many questions in Samuel's mind. Were the people rejecting Samuel's leadership? Were they rebelling against God? Were they determined to be like all the surrounding nations at any cost? Although the law gave instructions concerning an Israelite kingship, was this the time God had in mind for it to begin? Samuel had no answers for all these questions, so he did what he always did when faced with critical decisions or crisis situations. He **prayed to the LORD**. He took his questions to the One he knew would have the answers.

What can we as believers learn from Samuel's conversation with the elders thus far? There might be times when we discover that a family member or Christian friend has wandered perilously close to sin or has fallen into sin. Scripture urges us to seek to restore the person (Gal. 6:1a). At the same time, we are to guard our hearts and examine our motives to avoid falling into sin ourselves (1 Cor. 10:12; Gal. 6:1b). Finding this balance and carrying out this directive with love and grace often proves challenging. Thus, it is the height of godly wisdom to bathe in prayer our attempts to restore faltering Christian brothers and sisters. If our hearts are not right before God, how can we help others be right with Him? Further, God may give us new insights in prayer that keep us aligned with His greater plan.

VERSE 7

But the LORD told him, “Listen to the people and everything they say to you. They have not rejected you; they have rejected Me as their king.

The Lord responded to Samuel's prayer, but likely not in a manner Samuel expected. Samuel had served the Lord faithfully in his roles as prophet and judge for many years. He had seen the Lord take care of His people as they trusted Him. Why would the elders not trust Him now? Did the Lord not likewise see their actions as sinful? Samuel would soon discover that in God's sovereign plan, Israel's history would take a different direction than Samuel anticipated.

The LORD instructed Samuel to **listen to the people** (“hearken unto the voice of the people,” KJV; “obey the voice of the people,” ESV). The elders had proposed a new form of national leadership, and the Lord agreed to their plan. The words **everything they say to you** indicate God's desire that Samuel fully carry out the elders' proposal. The divine response must have astounded Samuel, at least for the moment. God's further explanation would clarify the situation.

The statement **they have not rejected you; they have rejected Me** addressed first of all Samuel's personal hurt. The people had not outright

rejected Samuel's leadership in their desire to have a king. Rather, the issue went much deeper. The people were essentially rejecting God **as their king**.

The phrase rendered *as their king* literally reads "from reigning over them." One of Israel's psalmists later wrote an "enthronement" psalm in which the Lord God was described as the nation's heavenly King, while Israel's earthly king ruled as His representative (Ps. 2:4-8). In the New Testament, the writer of Hebrews showed that ultimately Jesus Christ fulfilled the prophetic picture of God's anointed Ruler in Psalm 2 (as well as in other Bible passages; see Heb. 1:5-9). Indeed, Christ warned several unrepentant cities of His day with this message: "Whoever rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me" (Luke 10:16).

VERSE 8

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 worshipping other gods.

This verse is one of many places in Scripture where God's Word cuts to the heart of a matter like a double-edged blade (Heb. 4:12-13). The words **they are doing the same thing to you that they have done to Me** further explain what the Lord said to Samuel in 1 Samuel 8:7b. To some extent, the people had in fact rejected Samuel's leadership, in that they wanted a new form of governance that would be more permanent and durable. They assumed that a king would establish a dynasty and that the king and his descendants would rule for generations. What they couldn't guarantee, of course, was that future kings and their descendants would be righteous. If past history was any indicator of future behavior, the Israelites' demand for an earthly king was an ominous sign.

Samuel had been a faithful and godly leader, yet during his days the people had demonstrated their willingness to try to manipulate God by sending the ark of God into battle as though it were a good-luck charm (4:3-4). Some had displayed their lack of trust in God and His commands when they looked into the ark in violation of God's holy standard (6:19-20). Others had feared for their lives when the Philistines came against them, even though Samuel assured them victory would be theirs (7:7-12). The Israelites had seen God's faithfulness at every turn; Samuel's words had proven correct each time. Still, the people believed they had a better idea.

The phrase **since the day I brought them out of Egypt** referred to a time more than three centuries earlier. The Israelites' track record of obedience during their years in the wilderness had not been an inspiring one; indeed, they had doubted God at virtually every turn (Ex. 16:2-3; Num. 13:27-33; 14:1-4; 21:4-6; Deut. 9:6-8, 22-24).

The words **abandoning Me and worshiping other gods** aptly described Israel's experience during the days of the judges. Time and time again, the people fell away from God and began to worship the idols of the surrounding people groups. During these years, the Israelites failed to drive out some of the pagan inhabitants of the land. The people often acted more like the pagan inhabitants and less like the holy people they were called to be (Judg. 2:11-13).

Many centuries later, the apostle Paul warned believers living in the pagan city of Corinth to pay careful attention to the lessons that can be learned from Old Testament examples of unfaithfulness (1 Cor. 10:6-14). Likewise, believers today should learn from these examples. If we carelessly ignore or forget God's faithful acts in our lives, we become vulnerable to temptation. We might seek substitutes for Christ's lordship and fail to obey Him. As mentioned previously, one way to maintain a fresh memory of God's faithfulness is to keep a prayer journal. Reading accounts of His past guidance and provision in a journal or in Scripture helps the believer continue to trust Him in the present as well as in the future.

VERSE 9

Listen to them, but you must solemnly warn them and tell them about the rights of the king who will rule over them."

Often God disciplines His people by letting them experience the consequences of their unwise yet stubborn demands. Thus, the Lord repeated His command for Samuel to **listen to** ("hearken unto," KJV; "obey their voice," ESV) the people (see 8:7). However, the prophet also was to **solemnly warn** ("protest solemnly," KJV) the people **about the rights of the king**. The phrase *rights of the king* ("manner of the king," KJV; "ways of the king," ESV) refers to all of the demands an earthly king could make—and would make—on his subjects.

Samuel outlined those demands in 8:10-18, warning that the king would be a constant taker. He would take the people's sons as soldiers (8:11-12); their daughters as workers (8:13); their best fields, vineyards, and orchards for his administration's needs (8:14); and percentages of the people's produce, servants, and flocks as taxes (8:15-17). Samuel further warned of the day when the monarchy would become so irksome that people would "cry out because of the king" (8:18; compare 1 Kings 12:12-14).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Why do you think we as believers often must learn spiritual life lessons "the hard way"—that is, by first experiencing consequences of unwise choices? In what ways might God warn us of the consequences of poor choices?

REBELLION DETERMINED (1 Sam. 8:19-22)

Samuel was prepared to follow the Lord's instruction to accede to the elders' demand. He warned the people they would one day rue their decision to establish a monarchy. In that day they would ask the Lord for relief, but the die would be cast. The Lord would not answer them (8:18).

VERSE 19

The people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We must have a king over us."

Despite Samuel's clear warning about the ways of a king, **the people refused to listen to** their respected leader. The Hebrew word rendered *listen to* is the same word that appears in 8:7 and 8:9; it means "hearken to" or "obey." Ironically, the people would not obey their leader; their leader was instructed by the Lord to obey them in their demand for a king.

When Samuel described the "rights of the king" (8:9-17), he was not merely informing the people of the pros and cons of their decision. Rather, he was trying to talk them out of it. Their reply to Samuel was an emphatic **No!** The words **we must have a king** ("we will have a king," KJV; "we want a king," NIV) express their settled determination. Either they did not believe Samuel's dire warnings about the kingship or they thought no better option existed. Either way, they showed a lack of trust in the Lord as their true King.

VERSE 20

Then we'll be like all the other nations: our king will judge us, go out before us, and fight our battles."

The people again stated (see 8:5) their bottom-line motivation for wanting a king: **we'll be like all the other nations.** Did Israel really need to be like all the other nations? The people thought they did, but in reality, they did not. The surrounding nations did not share Israel's worldview or faith in the one true God. The people of those nations often had abominable practices (see Lev. 18:24-30). Many centuries after Samuel's time, when the Israelites who survived the Babylonian exile had returned to the promised land, leaders such as Ezra and Nehemiah recalled the price Israel had paid for trying to be like other nations (see Ezra 9:1-2; Neh. 13:1-3,15-18,23-27).

God always expects His people to be a distinct, holy people (2 Cor. 6:17). In His "high-priestly" prayer, the Lord Jesus described this expectation in terms of His followers' being "in" the world but not "of" the world (John 17:11,15-16). Our lives should reflect the glory of God as we are transformed into His image in Christ (2 Cor. 3:18).

The people's expectations of their proposed ruler were grandiose and involved a rejection of God's kingship. Their words **our king will judge us, go out before us, and fight our battles** clearly reveal this. To be sure, the king would render judgment between individuals on various matters. When the nation was threatened, he would lead the Israelite troops into battle against all invaders. But the king could never fight all the Israelites' battles alone—certainly not without the Lord's help! Clearly the Israelites were caught up with the idea of establishing a monarchy. All they could see were the potential benefits; they had not truly counted the cost. In fact, they overestimated even the potential benefits.

VERSE 21

Samuel listened to all the people's words and then repeated them to the LORD.

Samuel listened to all the people's words. This is the fourth of five times that forms of the word rendered *listened to* appear in this chapter (8:7,9,19,21,22). The term can mean "hearken to" or "obey." However, the emphasis of the word in this verse seems to be more on the act of hearing than obeying. That is, Samuel listened carefully to what the people said and the manner in which they said it.

Yet in his role as the Lord's prophet-judge, Samuel was not going to obey a popular demand without once more seeking God's guidance in the matter. The people clearly had made up their minds; they ignored Samuel's warnings. For Samuel, however, the ultimate authority belonged to the Lord, not to popular opinion. Thus, he **repeated** [the people's words] **to the LORD** in prayer.

Samuel's response illustrates an important characteristic of effective spiritual leaders: They listen carefully to the thoughts and ideas of the people they lead, even if those thoughts and ideas differ from their own. More than anything else, however, effective spiritual leaders seek to discern and follow God's guidance. They put others' ideas—as well as their own—before the Lord for His judgment, because ultimate success is found in obeying Him.

VERSE 22

"Listen to them," the LORD told Samuel. "Appoint a king for them." Then Samuel told the men of Israel, "Each of you, go back to your city."

As He had previously instructed, **the LORD told Samuel** to carry out the people's demand for a king. This is the fifth use in this chapter of a form of the word rendered **listen to**, meaning "to hearken" or "to obey." Samuel would still

play a key leadership role in the transition. He would be the one to **appoint a king** for Israel. He would help ensure an orderly, peaceful transfer of power. To be sure, Samuel would continue to seek and follow God's guidance in the matter, for the Lord would guide Samuel to His choice of a king.

The narrative of 1 Samuel soon identifies Saul, a physically impressive young man of the tribe of Benjamin, as God's choice to lead Israel as king (see 1 Sam. 9:1-2; 10:1,24). The process of Saul's rise to the kingship would follow this pattern: The Lord chose him (9:16); Samuel appointed (anointed) him (10:1); then the people twice affirmed him as king (10:24; 11:15). However, time would reveal the poor decision the people made in demanding a king.

Samuel's instructions for **the men of Israel** to return to their various cities and homes was not a childish delaying tactic. On the contrary, Samuel was wisely insisting that both he and the people await God's further leading on the matter. Samuel trusted that the Lord, in His perfect timing, would reveal the person who was to become Israel's first king.

The same faith in God that Samuel displayed also propelled the prophet Isaiah centuries later to declare that the Lord would one day reveal the King of kings to His people. Isaiah wrote: "For a child will be born for us, a son will be given to us, and the government will be on His shoulders. ... He will reign on the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish and sustain it with justice and righteousness from now on and forever. The zeal of the LORD of Hosts will accomplish this" (Isa. 9:6-7). That King, Jesus Christ, is the eternal Judge (2 Cor. 5:10) and Victor over sin and death (1 Cor. 15:55-57).

God desires His people then and now to be holy—that is, to be distinct from others and to trust Him in all matters. When we reject God's leaders and their warnings, we may be guilty of rejecting the lordship of Jesus Christ in the process. Difficult circumstances may sometimes tempt us to take matters into our own hands, but the Lord can and does provide the godly leadership we need for every situation.

Furthermore, our ultimate trust and obedience belong to the Lord alone. Only His ways are truly perfect. That is one reason regular Bible study is so important to our spiritual growth. God's Word illuminates our lives as a lamp illuminates a path in the night (Ps. 119:105). As we trust Him and put Him first, He will guide our steps in life (Prov. 3:5-6).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Obedience" on page 1206 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. How is our obedience to God a demonstration of faith? Why is disobedience to God's Word so serious?

FEARED

God's character and power demand reverential fear.

On September 22, 1989, Hurricane Hugo ravaged the coast of South Carolina. It hit the city of Charleston squarely, and the devastation was severe. The hurricane also spawned tornadoes as it surged inland. Our family of five huddled together in our home and prayed for God to spare us from calamity or loss of life. We lost electrical power for four days; however, many in South Carolina faced much bigger problems and losses. God's awesome power in nature was fully on display. We were afraid that night!

While many people might connect God's awesome power with a storm, it is also on display whenever we behold the majesty of a sunrise or sunset. Sometimes when I see a sunset that changes from one glorious color to another, I can't help but begin to hum the song "How Great Thou Art." The psalmist David agreed that God reveals His majesty in nature when he wrote, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky proclaims the work of His hands" (Ps. 19:1).

Scripture also teaches that "the fear of the LORD" provides the foundation for knowledge and wisdom (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). Does this mean that even as Christians we should be terrified of God? As His children, we know that if we have placed our faith in Jesus Christ, our future is secure and we have eternal life. Nothing can separate us from God's saving love (Rom. 8:38-39). At the same time, God's awesome display of power through nature and other means indeed can (and should) evoke deep, reverential fear of Him.

When Samuel gathered all the Israelites of his day for a final public teaching, he called them to renew their devotion to the Lord. They now had an earthly king. If they maintained their supreme loyalty to the Lord God, they would do well. If they disobeyed and abandoned the Lord, trusting instead only in their human king or in idols, then they would be swept away as a nation.

As you study this session's Bible passage, take note of Samuel's powerful words. They show that God is committed to His people even when His people falter in sin. When we truly repent, God readily forgives; He has provided everlasting forgiveness in His Son, Jesus Christ. When we approach Him with the reverent fear He deserves, we will encounter His grace and mercy.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 SAMUEL 12:1-25

Saul's victory over the Ammonites led the people to reconfirm the kingship at Gilgal (1 Sam. 11:14-15). It also marked a shift in Israel's leadership. Saul was now king; thus, Samuel's role would change. Samuel took the occasion at Gilgal to address the people about the nation's future.

He began his address by reminding the people of his long and faithful tenure as a prophet-judge (12:1-5). He challenged the people to affirm his integrity or else publicly air any charges of wrongdoing before the Lord and the new king. The people assured Samuel there were no charges against him.

Next, Samuel reminded the people of events in Israel's past when the Lord acted as His people's Savior and King (12:6-12). No event was more pivotal than God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery (12:6-8). However, the generation of Israelites who took possession of the promised land soon abandoned the covenant. They forsook their exclusive devotion to the Lord and worshiped idols. Their unfaithfulness soon became a cycle of being put under the domination of their enemies, then crying out to the Lord, and then being rescued by God-appointed judges, the most recent of whom was Samuel (12:9-11). In spite of God's faithfulness during these years, the present Ammonite threat had led the Israelites to demand a king (12:12). In doing so, they in effect abandoned yet again the Lord's kingship over them.

Samuel thus challenged the people and their new king to remain devoted exclusively to their ever-faithful God (12:13-25). They needed to fear the Lord, worshiping and obeying only Him, lest they experience His judgment. Samuel called for the Lord to bring thunder and rain during the dry harvest season as a sign of His warning against the people's demand for an earthly king. When the sign appeared as called for, the people were struck with fear and pleaded for mercy. Samuel assured the people of the Lord's purpose and again challenged them to be faithful to God. He further promised that he would never cease to pray for God's people and to teach them "the good and right way" (12:23).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE COVENANT REVISITED (1 Sam. 12:12-15)

Following Saul's impressive victory over the Ammonites as the Israelites' commander-in-chief, all of the people were ready to confirm Saul as king.

Samuel gathered the people at Gilgal before the Lord to confirm their new king. While there, he also charged the people to acknowledge his faithfulness as leader and to rededicate themselves to the Lord as their true King.

VERSE 12

“But when you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites was coming against you, you said to me, ‘No, we must have a king rule over us’—even though the LORD your God is your king.

Four factors converged in the biblical account to propel Israel’s transition from tribal confederation to monarchy. First, the elders of Israel saw no hope that Samuel’s sons would provide the good leadership Samuel had provided; the people wanted a king (8:1-5). Second, the Lord twice instructed Samuel to give the people what they wanted while also warning them of the king’s rights (8:9,22). Third, the Lord showed Samuel through a personal encounter with Saul and by an official selection process that Saul was His choice as Israel’s king (9:16-17; 10:20-24). Fourth, Saul proved that he could lead and protect Israel by defeating a clear and present enemy threat (11:1-15).

At the Gilgal confirmation service, Samuel focused on the fourth (and most recent) factor. **Nahash king of the Ammonites** had threatened the citizens of Jabesh-gilead [JAY besh-GIL ih uhd], an Israelite city that lay on the eastern side of the Jordan River. The *Ammonites* were descendants of Lot, Abraham’s nephew (Gen. 19:38), and lived east of the Jordan River in the territory of modern-day Jordan. Samuel contended that fear of the Ammonite threat had provoked the Israelites to demand they **have a king rule over** them. After all, the Ammonites had a king; indeed, all the surrounding nations had kings.

Samuel reminded the Israelites, however, that they were called to be different from other nations. The phrase **even though the LORD your God is your king** was a rebuke of the people. They were abandoning their true King by clamoring to be like all the other nations.

VERSE 13

Now here is the king you’ve chosen, the one you requested. Look, this is the king the LORD has placed over you.

Samuel emphasized the people’s accountability. They had demanded the transition to a monarchy simply to be like the surrounding nations. Saul was the ruler they had **chosen, the one** [they] **requested**. They held significant responsibility for giving Saul royal power. To be sure, God had granted the people’s demand and had guided the process that ultimately put Saul in

command of Israel. However, the people needed to acknowledge that to the extent their demand for a king showed a lack of trust in the Lord, it was rebellious, unwise, and sinful. The Lord would never abdicate His rule over His covenant people. He would grant their request and ultimately use it to advance His greater plan of salvation. That is, one day the Father would send His Son, the King of kings, to assert His power over all enemies (Rev. 17:14).

VERSE 14

If you fear the LORD, worship and obey Him, and if you don't rebel against the LORD's command, then both you and the king who rules over you will follow the LORD your God.

Samuel put before the people four conditions for the monarchy to succeed in Israel. First, the people and their king needed to **fear the LORD**. At its foundation, fear of the Lord is an attitude of deep, reverential awe. God is utterly beyond all of His creation, including human beings. He is infinitely perfect in all godly characteristics, including goodness, power, and wisdom. As such, He deserves the utmost respect and submission. Fear of the Lord also can include trepidation, as the Israelites soon would be reminded.

Second, Samuel instructed the people and their king to **worship** the Lord exclusively. The word rendered *worship* literally means “to serve” and communicates an important aspect of worship. Worship is not merely what happens on a Sunday morning at church gatherings. Worship is a lifestyle; it is a day-by-day honoring of the Lord with all of one's thoughts, values, and actions. According to Paul in his letter to believers in Rome, worship involves continuously presenting oneself as a “living sacrifice” to God (Rom. 12:1).

Third, Samuel instructed the people to **obey** the Lord. The Israelites' obedience was not to be a slavish servitude but a joyful confidence that God's ways are best. Obeying the Lord would bring blessing and fulfillment to their lives as well as to their nation.

Some Christians today do not like to hear an emphasis on obedience. They say things such as, “We're not saved by our works; we're saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.” That's true! Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8-9, “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift—not from works, so that no one can boast.” Yet in the very next verse Paul went on to describe the believer's life of obedience: “For we are His creation, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time so that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). Followers of Christ show their love for the Lord by obeying His commands (John 14:21). Good works and acts of obedience cannot save a person, but they do reflect that an individual has a genuine relationship with the Lord.

Samuel stated in negative terms the fourth condition for the Israelite monarchy's true success: **if you don't rebel against the LORD's command.** This was a warning that came from the Law of Moses (Ex. 23:21). Ultimately, rebellion and disobedience against God come when His people doubt that He knows better than they do what is best for their lives.

Samuel then communicated the result that would come as the Israelites fulfilled these four conditions. The words **you and the king who rules over you will follow the LORD your God** indicated Samuel's desire—as well as God's desire—for covenant obedience. God was looking not only for King Saul to obey Him but also for all the Israelites to obey Him. The king needed to do his part, but the people needed to do their part too. When both the king and the people lived consistently in obedience to the Lord's commands, covenant blessings were sure to follow (Deut. 28:1-14).

VERSE 15

However, if you disobey the LORD and rebel against His command, the LORD's hand will be against you and against your ancestors.

In verse 14, Samuel highlighted the potential blessings that would come if the people followed God at every step. In verse 15 he warned them of the peril of disobedience. The words translated **disobey the LORD** literally read “disobey the voice of the LORD.” The words **rebel against His command** parallel the similar words in verse 14.

The LORD's hand was an expression often used in describing God's judgment. For example, it appeared three times in 1 Samuel 5 to describe God's judgment against the Philistines on account of the ark (5:6,9,11). God afflicted the Philistines until they returned the ark to the Israelites. Samuel warned that the Lord's hand of judgment would similarly afflict the Israelites if they rebelled against Him.

Some readers may wonder what the biblical writer meant by using the future tense for the phrase **will be ... against your ancestors** (“against your fathers,” KJV). After all, *ancestors* belong to the past, not the future. The phrase in the Hebrew literally reads “and against your fathers.” One way that the phrase has been interpreted holds that Samuel was saying God's hand of judgment would be against His rebellious people in the future just as surely as it had been in the days of the previous generations—ancestors—mentioned in 12:8-10. Some English translations, however, follow the Septuagint, an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament. The Septuagint reads at this point: “and against your king” (see ESV). Either way the point is clear: rebellion would result in God's hand of disciplinary judgment. Samuel called

for the people and their new king to obey the Lord, because disobedience would bring certain disaster.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Sovereignty of God” on pages 1523-1524 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. How does the biblical teaching of God’s sovereignty bring comfort and assurance? How does God’s sovereignty relate to human responsibility?

A SIGN DELIVERED (1 Sam. 12:16-18)

VERSE 16

Now, therefore, present yourselves and see this great thing that the LORD will do before your eyes.

Samuel had recounted the people’s unfaithfulness to God contrasted against God’s gracious faithfulness to them. The words **now, therefore** indicate that Samuel was getting ready to drive home his point. He would do so with a powerful illustration.

The phrase **present yourselves** (“stand still,” ESV, NIV) literally means “make yourselves stand.” The same term was used in 10:19 when Samuel organized the people at Mizpah by tribes, clans, and families for the selection of Saul as king. The words **this great thing** might have been understood initially to anticipate some great blessing from God. Instead, God was about to perform a heavenly sign to confirm that the people had acted in unbelief by asking for a king. The phrase **before your eyes** highlights that the Lord’s sign would be public. Everyone would witness it, and no one would fail to understand its significance.

VERSE 17

Isn’t the wheat harvest today? I will call on the LORD and He will send thunder and rain, so that you will know and see what a great evil you committed in the LORD’s sight by requesting a king for yourselves.”

The wheat harvest season in ancient Israel occurred around what would be late May and early June on the modern calendar. The Feast of Weeks officially marked the time of ingathering (Lev. 23:15-21; Num. 28:26-31). The celebration of Pentecost also coincided with this festival.

Samuel told the people that he would **call on the LORD** to underscore the warning about disobedience and to demonstrate His response concerning the Israelites' demand for a king. **Thunder and rain** normally did not occur in Israel during the harvest season. Such an occurrence would have been highly unusual and would often be interpreted as a divine portent. Indeed, Samuel explained that the extraordinary weather event would signal once and for all that the people's demand for a king was **a great evil ... in the LORD's sight** (compare 8:6 and comments on that verse on pp. 43-44).

What was the people's *great evil*? After all, God's law had anticipated the establishment of a monarchy (Deut. 17:14-20). One possible explanation of the people's sin was their failure to wait on God's timing for the kingship. Waiting on God's timing was difficult for Israel, and waiting on God's timing can be difficult for believers today as well.

The failure to wait on God can be a sign of outright rebellion against His lordship. This truth has led some Bible students to suggest that Israel's *great evil* was a failure to repent of their sins in the face of the Ammonite threat. In the throes of previous threats of outside oppression, the people would call out to God in repentance, and He would raise up a judge-deliverer (see Judg. 3:9,15; 10:9-16). With the elders' demand for a king, however, the people had refused to repent and had insisted instead on installing a king-deliverer apart from God's initiative.

VERSE 18

Samuel called on the LORD, and on that day the LORD sent thunder and rain. As a result, all the people greatly feared the LORD and Samuel.

From the time of his youth, Samuel had been recognized as a true prophet in Israel. "The LORD was with him, and He fulfilled everything Samuel prophesied" (1 Sam. 3:19). Samuel was old now, but the relationship between the Lord and His prophet had not waned. Thus, when **Samuel called on the LORD** at Gilgal to send a great sign to the people, **the LORD sent thunder and rain** during the harvest season, the driest time of the year. Such a storm could severely damage the standing, ripened grain; at the least, it would make harvesting the grain extremely difficult.

The Israelites realized the miraculous nature of the *thunder and rain*. The sign revealed the truth of Samuel's charge against them. The people had not asked for a king in obedience to God but rather in disobedience, in a lack of faith and a show of outright rebellion. They had committed a great evil, and their sin now loomed ominously before their eyes and ears in the storm. **As a result, all the people greatly feared the LORD and Samuel.**

The fear of God includes a deep reverence for God's holy nature. At the same time, it also includes a sense of trepidation. The righteous, holy God of the universe will not permit evil and sin to go unpunished. This is why the gospel of Jesus Christ is truly good news for sinners. The sinless Savior took on Himself the punishment for our sins in order that through faith in Him we could be made right with God (2 Cor. 5:20-21)!

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Fear" on pages 562-563 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, giving particular attention to the section on "Fear of God." How would you explain to an unbeliever what it means to fear God? What does the fear of God look like in practical terms in the believer's life?

GOD'S MERCY AND GRACE (1 Sam. 12:19-22)

The Lord had agreed to give His people a king and had authorized Samuel to anoint Saul as king. Samuel had warned the people about the king's rights and challenged them (and the king) never to rebel against the Lord. Nonetheless, a divinely timed storm revealed that the people had indeed sinned against God in their demand for an earthly king. How would the people respond?

VERSE 19

They pleaded with Samuel, "Pray to the LORD your God for your servants, so we won't die! For we have added to all our sins the evil of requesting a king for ourselves."

The people **pleaded with Samuel** ("said unto Samuel," KJV). The storm had terrified them, convincing them they did not want to fall under God's judgment. They addressed Samuel with concern, because he was God's representative. The words **pray to the LORD your God for your servants** expressed a humble plea for Samuel's intercession. The great leader had interceded for the people previously in a crucial fight against the Philistines, and the Lord had delivered His people (see 7:8-11). The people's reference to God as *the LORD your God* indicates their confidence in Samuel's relationship with the Lord. It also may indicate that they felt a certain distance from God as a consequence of their spiritual rebellion. They didn't want to die.

The words **we have added to all our sins** could indicate that the people were ready to repent. They now admitted the sinful basis of their **requesting a king**. Genuine confession is a willingness to get specific about one's sins.

The people's demand for an earthly king loomed before them as one more grievous act of rebellion. Thus, the people pleaded for their lives as they realized the depth of their sinfulness.

VERSE 20

Samuel replied, “Don’t be afraid. Even though you have committed all this evil, don’t turn away from following the LORD. Instead, worship the LORD with all your heart.”

Samuel calmed the people by saying, “**Don’t be afraid.**” Notice that he did not tell them everything was okay, for they had indeed **committed all this evil**. Yet Samuel knew intimately Israel’s God. He knew from the law that while God does not leave the guilty unpunished, the Lord also is “a compassionate and gracious God, ... forgiving wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin” (Ex. 34:6-7).

The command **don’t turn away from following the LORD** carries a sense of urgency. Samuel commanded the people to embrace a fresh start and to **worship** (“serve,” KJV, ESV, NIV) **the LORD** wholeheartedly and exclusively. The expression **with all your heart** called the people to a total commitment of their lives. The Hebrew word translated *heart* often describes the heart as the source of both intellect and will. It is an expression that describes the believer’s total commitment to God (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37-38).

In Deuteronomy 9:7, Moses warned the Israelites who stood poised to enter and possess the promised land to remember the spiritual failures of the previous generation in the wilderness. Moses’ point, however, was not to heap a burden of guilt on the new generation but rather to help them avoid the same spiritual failures with the same attendant consequences.

In the New Testament era, the apostle Paul gave a similar warning to followers of Christ living in Corinth. Paul urged believers—then and now—to remember what happened to the disobedient Israelites of the past “so that we will not desire evil things as they did” (1 Cor. 10:6). Like Moses before him and Paul after him, Samuel wanted the people of his day to learn from their (and others’) past failures, so that they would not rebel against the Lord in the future.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Forgiveness” on pages 596-597 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Why is forgiveness so important in the believer’s relationship with the Lord? Why should forgiveness for others flow naturally from the believer’s relationship with the Lord?

VERSE 21

Don't turn away to follow worthless things that can't profit or deliver you; they are worthless.

In the Hebrew, the words **don't turn away** in this verse are different in form than the same command (in English) in verse 20. Here the command stresses a broad prohibition—"don't ever turn away." The Hebrew word translated **worthless things** ("vain things," KJV; "empty things," ESV; "useless idols," NIV) is the same word found in Genesis 1:2 describing the empty void before the earth's creation. Samuel compared false gods (idols) to that same primordial emptiness. Idols are nothing; they cannot give their worshipers any real foundation for life. They **can't profit** people in any way; neither can they **deliver** people from enemies or, more importantly, from sin.

Samuel's words to the Israelites sound a sober warning to our lives as well. Our ultimate trust always must rest in the Lord, never in earthly things.

VERSE 22

The LORD will not abandon His people, because of His great name and because He has determined to make you His own people."

Samuel further assured the Israelites that the Lord would **not abandon His people**. The Lord has a **great name** that reflects His eternal nature, character, and purpose. When He makes a promise He keeps it (see Isa. 55:11). When He established Israel as a covenant nation (see Ex. 19:5-6), He was **determined to make** [the Israelites] **His own people**. The covenant would endure only if it was based on the Lord's character and purpose. He would keep His word, so that the whole world might know of His great name.

The Lord is no less determined to make His name great among the nations today. Indeed, Jesus Christ calls His followers to go in His full authority and "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). His follower John saw a vision of heaven in which a redeemed people "from every tribe and language and people and nation" had been transformed into "a kingdom and priests to our God" (Rev. 5:9-10).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Names of God" on pages 1171-1173 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. How do God's various names point to His "great name"? If you are unfamiliar with one or more of God's names, use a concordance to find and read verses that contain those names.

JUDGED

Judgment awaits those who reject God's instruction.

Have you ever purchased an item with the words “assembly required” on the box? Those two words really make me uneasy! They scare me because I am not naturally gifted at putting things together. Consequently, I often gladly pay the additional fee for the store to assemble the item for me.

Of course, there have been a few times when I couldn't avoid the dreaded assembly requirement. I would open the box, spread all the parts on the floor, fetch any necessary tools, and then proceed to read and reread the “easy” step-by-step instructions. I would then do my best to follow the instructions exactly—one step at a time. If a part didn't fit right or didn't match the drawing, then I would stop, read the instructions for the step once more, and try again until it was right. My approach was: “Hey, these instructions came from the designer, and no one should know better than the designer how to put this item together!”

In a much greater way, the Bible is God's instruction manual for life. Following His instructions is crucial, because He, the Creator, designed the abundant life He offers us (John 10:10). As my pastor once stated: “No one has ever wrecked his or her life by genuinely following God's Word!”

Problems do come, however, when we fail to follow God's commands. God gave us His commands for our good. When we follow them, we choose God's best. When we reject them, bad consequences follow.

This session focuses on Saul's disobedience of God's commands. Saul chose to substitute rituals for wholehearted trust in the Lord. As you study the Bible passage, ponder what areas of your life you need to surrender more fully to God. Where are you not giving to God your wholehearted trust and obedience? Do you feel, perhaps, that God is holding back something that is better than what He has to offer? Are you willing to surrender your life completely to God, following wherever He leads and doing all He commands?

Will we find ourselves with the courage Samuel had to confront a wayward king, as God leads us to confront a wayward brother or sister or even a leader? We can never earn the right to be God's people by what we do—we're saved by God's grace—but God does look for obedience from His children.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 SAMUEL 13:1–15:35

The Philistines threatened Israel constantly during Saul's reign. First Samuel 13–14 describes Saul's battles with the Philistines primarily in the territory of Benjamin. If the Philistines gained control of this tribal region, they would effectively cut the promised land in half west of the Jordan River and in the process divide Israel's northern and southern tribes.

The scene in chapter 13 opens with Saul camped at Michmash [MIK mash] with two-thirds of his standing army. His son Jonathan and the remainder of the army were camped less than five miles south at Gibeah [GIB ih uh], Saul's hometown and the new capital. Directly between the two camps lay the Levitical town of Geba [GHEE buh]. A Philistine detachment had penetrated this town and was garrisoned there, but Jonathan moved quickly to expel the Philistines from Geba. Saul realized that Jonathan's action would trigger a much larger battle, so he retreated to Gilgal and called for the reuniting of his army. Meanwhile, the Philistines mustered a formidable, well-armed force, taking over Saul's abandoned camp at Michmash (13:1-5).

At Gilgal, Saul and his troops were in a desperate situation. Moreover, Saul was waiting for Samuel to arrive and offer a sacrifice—as the prophet had earlier instructed (see 10:8)—yet Samuel had not arrived at the appointed time. Consequently, Saul assumed the priestly role and offered the sacrifices himself. When Samuel finally arrived and saw what Saul had done, he condemned the king's disobedience of the Lord. Samuel declared that Saul's reign would not endure; the Lord would establish a ruler who was loyal to Him. Samuel then left Saul to his impending battle (13:6-15).

First Samuel 13:16–14:46 details a remarkable Israelite victory over the Philistines near Michmash. Jonathan proved to be the hero of Israel, almost singlehandedly striking panic into the hearts of the Philistines. Jonathan's complete confidence was in the Lord, evidenced by his bold declaration: "Nothing can keep the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few" (14:6).

When Saul and his troops realized the Philistines were terrified, they pressed the battle and put the enemy into a panicked retreat. Saul put his soldiers under a foolish oath to eat nothing all day until they had utterly destroyed his enemies. Jonathan was unaware of the oath and ate some honey. Further, the Israelite soldiers became so famished they ate captured meat that had blood in it, a breach of the law. Only the quick construction of an altar to the Lord (14:35), a priest's reminder to consult God (14:36-37), and the Israelites' insistence that Jonathan be redeemed from Saul's foolish oath (14:45) kept the king from making the situation even worse.

First Samuel 14:47-52 gives a summary of Saul's reign, his battle victories, his children, and other family members who served in his administration. Then chapter 15 describes the incident that solidified the Lord's rejection of Saul's dynasty. Saul refused to fully obey the Lord's command of holy war against the Amalekites [uh MAL uh kights] (see Ex. 17:14).

Saul and his troops struck down the Amalekites as commanded, but they spared the captured king and refused to destroy the best animals with all the rest. Samuel confronted the disobedient king, who attempted to blame his soldiers and to justify his sparing of the best livestock so that the animals could be used as sacrifices. Even a confession of sin did not change the outcome of the Lord's decision to reject Saul. Samuel finished the job Saul had failed to complete and then never met with the king again (15:1-35).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

SAUL'S DISOBEDIENCE (1 Sam. 15:7-9)

Saul already had shown a tendency to hedge his loyalty to God, offering only partial obedience in place of full obedience (13:12-13). Nevertheless, God gave Saul a clearly defined mission to destroy the Amalekites and all their possessions (15:1-3). The mission would fulfill God's judgment against a people who had attacked the Israelites coming out of Egypt (Ex. 17:14).

VERSE 7

Then Saul struck down the Amalekites from Havilah all the way to Shur, which is next to Egypt.

The words **struck down** ("smote," KJV; "defeated," ESV) indicate that Saul won a decisive victory over **the Amalekites**. The expression **from Havilah all the way to Shur** designates a broad territory to the south of Israel—spanning perhaps from Arabia in the east to the border of **(next to) Egypt** in the west. The descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's son, lived in this region (Gen. 25:18). The Kenites, a people with whom the Israelites were on friendly terms, also lived in the region; thus, Saul warned this group to leave the region before his attack (1 Sam. 15:6). The *Amalekites*, on the other hand, were a warlike nomadic people that descended from Amalek, the grandson of Esau (Gen. 36:12). Not only had the Amalekites been the first to attack the Israelites after they left Egypt, but they also continued to pick off stragglers as God's people moved through the wilderness (Deut. 25:17-19).

Attacking the Amalekites represented the first step in obeying God's command. Saul claimed a decisive victory, but he needed to finish the task.

VERSE 8

He captured Agag king of Amalek alive, but he completely destroyed all the rest of the people with the sword.

Saul **captured Agag** [AY gag], **king of Amalek alive**. The text does not reveal Saul's reason for sparing the Amalekite leader's life, even if it was to be only a temporary sparing. Perhaps the biblical writer meant to emphasize here the stark contrast between half-hearted and full obedience to God. While Saul **completely destroyed all the rest of the people with the sword**—as God had commissioned him to do—he decided to modify God's command. At that moment Saul thought he knew better than God what needed to be done.

The term translated *completely destroyed* was used in the context of holy war, of which a memorable example was the conquest of Jericho. In holy war, Israelite soldiers were to take no booty or captives for themselves. All was to be given to God by being completely destroyed or put into the Lord's treasury (see Josh. 6:18-21). Thus, Saul's sparing of the Amalekite king was no less a sin against God's command than was Achan's [AY kuhh] taking of holy treasures from Jericho for personal profit (see Josh. 7:20-21).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Holy War" on pages 774-775 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Take note especially of the final paragraph, which begins with the question "Why would a loving God order the wholesale extermination of the nations living in the promised land?"

VERSE 9

Saul and the troops spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, cattle, and choice animals, as well as the young rams and the best of everything else. They were not willing to destroy them, but they did destroy all the worthless and unwanted things.

This verse reveals that Saul's decision to disobey God's command extended beyond sparing the Amalekite king. Saul also allowed (if not commanded) his soldiers to keep alive **the best of the sheep, cattle, and choice animals, as well as the young rams and ... everything else**. This decision was a direct violation of God's clear command in 1 Samuel 15:3. But what was behind the violation?

The text says only that the victors **were not willing to destroy** the best animals. Of course, they did not hesitate to **destroy all the worthless and**

unwanted things. Thus, it seems likely that the Israelites, with Saul leading the way, yielded to the temptation of greed. They could not bring themselves to let go of such valuable assets. They refused to think of themselves as stealing from God, although God had given the victory and had a rightful claim to all of the spoils. Perhaps Saul and his soldiers reasoned they were simply reclaiming possessions that Amalekites previously had stolen from Israelites. At any rate, their partial obedience was disobedience in God's eyes.

Life often pushes us today to choose between God's directives and our individual circumstances. This is certainly the case when it comes to our view of possessions and biblical stewardship. When we as followers of Christ refer to Him as "Lord," we are saying that He owns everything we have in our possession. He gives us material possessions to use for His glory in advancing His kingdom. We dare not value our things over the Lord; to do so is idolatry (Matt. 6:24; Col. 3:5). In the area of biblical stewardship, as in all of the believer's life, partial obedience is really no obedience.

SAMUEL'S CONFRONTATION (1 Sam. 15:10-15)

VERSES 10-11

Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel, "I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned away from following Me and has not carried out My instructions." So Samuel became angry and cried out to the LORD all night.

Verse 10 reveals that although Israel now had a king, Samuel continued as the authoritative prophet through whom **the word of the LORD came**. The king had his "rights" (1 Sam. 8:11), yet both he and God's people were to be under submission to their true King through His spoken *word*.

Today we have God's authoritative revelation in His written Word, the Scriptures. God's Spirit inspired the writing of the Scriptures; moreover, He uses them to bring individuals to faith in Jesus and to equip believers for Christian living (2 Tim. 3:15-16). This is why we can continue to find treasures of God's truth in texts such as 1 Samuel 15.

The Hebrew term rendered **I regret** ("it repenteth me," KJV)—with the Lord as the presumed subject of the verb—occurs in all of Scripture only here and one other place. The term also appears in Genesis 6:7 to describe the Lord's regret over creating human beings in light of their deep and widespread wickedness in Noah's day. In neither context does the term suggest that God had done something morally wrong. Rather, it showed His deep sadness over the sinful moral choices made by the only creatures He had made in His image. Of course, God knows everything and therefore

knew what the people of Noah's day would do; He also knew what King Saul would do. Nevertheless, it pained the Lord to see the disobedience come about. God had made Saul king, but Saul had chosen to sin.

The verb translated **has turned away** often refers in the prophets to true repentance (see Jer. 3:7, Hos. 7:10). Here, however, the term describes Saul's conscious decision to disobey the Lord. The words **has not carried out My instructions** literally mean "has not caused My words to stand." God had given His king clear directives, but Saul had not fulfilled them. He obeyed God's instructions to a point, then proceeded with his own plan.

The words **Samuel became angry** highlight Samuel's frustration at Saul's failing kingship. The word translated **cried out** denotes a cry of distress or concern (see Judg. 3:9; 1 Sam. 7:8-9). Samuel had anointed Saul as king according to the Lord's guidance (1 Sam. 10:1). He had warned the people of the consequences of kingship (8:11-18), but the people had persisted in their sinful demand to have a king like all the nations around them. It hurt Samuel, as it pained the Lord, to see Israel's king fail so miserably.

Samuel's prayer was intense; he took his burden **to the LORD all night**. God's prophet was caught in the middle of a sad situation. He loved his God above all else, yet he also had a deep concern for the people of Israel and their king. Only God would know what to do next, so Samuel prayed fervently.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Intercession" on pages 828-829 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. How would you define intercessory prayer? What can Samuel's prayers thus far teach us about intercessory prayer (see 1 Sam. 7:9-12; 8:6-10; 12:23-25; 15:10-11)?

VERSE 12

Early in the morning Samuel got up to confront Saul, but it was reported to Samuel, "Saul went to Carmel where he set up a monument for himself. Then he turned around and went down to Gilgal."

After a long night of prayer, Samuel arose **early in the morning** and went **to confront Saul**. The text does not reveal either where Samuel began his journey—perhaps he was still in Gibeah, the capital (see 13:15)—or where he expected to find Saul. In any event, the elderly prophet likely anticipated that the conversation would not be pleasant wherever it took place. Still, Samuel had a message from the Lord that had to be delivered to the king.

At some point Samuel got a report of Saul's "victory march" itinerary. The king's first order of business was to **set up a monument** ("a place," KJV) **for himself** at **Carmel**. This *Carmel* was not the well-known mountain in northern Israel near the coast but rather a town located about seven miles south of Hebron in Judah's hill country (see Josh. 15:55). The town may have been a frequent target of Amalekite raids. If so, its citizens would welcome an opportunity to celebrate and honor their deliverer. Whereas Samuel had once erected a monument called "Ebenezer" (meaning "stone of help") to honor the Lord (7:12), Saul seized on this opportunity to honor himself.

The report to Samuel further revealed that Saul then left Carmel and **went down to Gilgal**. *Gilgal* held great historical significance for Israel. Located near Jericho, it was the place where the Israelites set up a memorial of twelve stones after having crossed the Jordan River on dry ground (Josh. 4:20-22). Samuel included Gilgal on his regular ministry circuit (1 Sam. 7:16). From the central hill country of Israel, travelers would need to descend several thousand feet to the Jordan River valley—thus, the description of going *down to Gilgal*.

VERSE 13

When Samuel came to him, Saul said, "May the LORD bless you. I have carried out the LORD's instructions."

Saul's greeting to Samuel, "**May the LORD bless you,**" denotes an air of celebration and accomplishment. Saul had convinced himself that his smashing victory meant he had **carried out the LORD's instructions**. He would discover that neither God nor His prophet shared that perspective!

Believers may find it easy to condemn Saul for not fully carrying out God's command. Yet, are we bold enough to ask the Lord to reveal where we are showing only half-hearted obedience? Are we willing to carry out God's commands, whether large or small, whether convenient or inconvenient?

VERSE 14

Samuel replied, "Then what is this sound of sheep and cattle I hear?"

Samuel replied to Saul's excited comment with a question that cut to the heart of the matter. The Lord had instructed Saul to utterly destroy everything that the Amalekites possessed, including all their animals (15:3). The **sound of sheep and cattle** ("bleating of the sheep ... lowing of the oxen," KJV, ESV) would have been undeniable evidence that Saul had not carried out God's command to the fullest. Saul's partial obedience revealed that the king did not fully trust the Lord to know and do what was best.

VERSE 15

Saul answered, “The troops brought them from the Amalekites and spared the best sheep and cattle in order to offer a sacrifice to the LORD your God, but the rest we destroyed.”

Saul quickly attempted to deflect responsibility for the failure to obey God from himself to others. He offered two excuses. First, Saul tried to put the blame on **the troops** (“the soldiers,” NIV). While it may have been technically true that the king’s soldiers had rounded up the Amalekites’ **best sheep and cattle** to bring home with them, Saul was their commander and had taken the lead (see 15:9) in sparing animals that should have been slaughtered along with **the rest**.

Second, Saul attempted to justify his disobedience as an act of worship. They had brought the best animals back to Gilgal **in order to offer a sacrifice**. Even if that motive was true—Saul never indicated to his soldiers the reason for sparing the Amalekite king and the best animals—the intended sacrifice did not excuse and would not atone for his blatant disobedience. Saul’s reference to the sacrifice being offered to **the LORD your God** sounded an ominous tone. Tragically, it also seemed to fit the situation well. Saul did not appear to have a close relationship with God. First Samuel 14:47-48 highlights his victories, to be sure; yet he disobeyed the Lord at crucial moments, and this moment was one of the worst.

Sometimes believers may face the uncomfortable situation of needing to confront someone who disobeys God’s clear direction. The apostle Paul encouraged believers to lovingly confront and work to restore anyone caught in some manner of wrongdoing (Gal. 6:1). Such confrontations are to be carried out with grace and with a view toward the faltering believer’s repentance and restoration. At the same time, believers always are to examine their own hearts lest they fall victim to the same temptation or to another temptation. All believers are sinners saved by grace, but that does not mean there is never a need for believers to hold one another accountable. By letting the Spirit guide the process, believers can encourage and correct one another without developing a harsh, judgmental spirit.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Judging” on pages 961-962 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. When have you seen an example of a Christian lovingly confronting another believer without being judgmental? What would you say is the key to successful confrontation and restoration?

GOD'S REJECTION (1 Sam. 15:22-23)

Samuel did not accept Saul's attempts to justify himself. Further, Samuel reminded the king of the Lord's clear instructions regarding the Amalekites and questioned why Saul would choose to do what was evil in God's eyes. Saul continued to insist that he had indeed obeyed the Lord and had spared the best animals only to offer them as a sacrifice at Gilgal (15:16-21).

VERSE 22

Then Samuel said: Does the LORD take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? Look: to obey is better than sacrifice, to pay attention is better than the fat of rams.

This verse gets to the heart of what the Lord God expects from His people in a covenant relationship. King Saul could not understand why the Lord's prophet would not be thrilled by the victory over the Amalekites capped by a gigantic offering of the best plunder taken. Samuel thus put the issue to the king in the form of a question: **"Does the LORD take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying [Him]?"** The implied answer was no. Of course, the law included sacrifices and offerings; giving them for the right reason and in the prescribed way was itself a form of obedience. However, Saul's planned sacrifice was in defiance of the Lord's command. No self-serving sacrifice could excuse or atone for disobedience.

Samuel drove home the point by answering his own question: **To obey is better than sacrifice, to pay attention** ("hearken," KJV; "listen," ESV; "heed," NIV) **is better than the fat of rams.** Partial obedience of God is really disobedience! What pleases God most from His people—what pleases Him especially from those He puts in leadership of His people—is a heart of obedience. Carrying out religious rituals can never substitute for trusting and obeying the Lord with all of one's heart.

Allusions to Samuel's bold declaration are found throughout Scripture. David wrote in his great psalm of confession, "You do not want a sacrifice, or I would give it; ... The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. God, You will not despise a broken and humbled heart" (Ps. 51:16-17; compare to Ps. 40:6-8). The prophet Isaiah warned the people of his day that the Lord hated their hypocritical rituals, festivals, and prayers offered in place of living in obedience to the Lord (Isa. 1:11-17). The prophets Micah and Hosea likewise warned their hearers about what the Lord desires of His people (Mic. 6:6-8; Hos. 6:6). In the New Testament, Jesus declared that loving God wholeheartedly and loving one's neighbor are far more important than offering sacrifices (Mark 12:33). The writer of Hebrews used Scripture

related to Samuel's declaration to show that Jesus came as the Messiah not to offer animal sacrifices but to obey the Father's will by offering Himself as the perfect sacrifice for mankind's sin (Heb. 10:5-10).

VERSE 23

For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and defiance is like wickedness and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He has rejected you as king.

The statement that **rebellion is like the sin of divination** was a strong warning about disobedience. *Divination* involved analyzing natural phenomena such as animal entrails or smoke formations to discern the will of the gods. In the law, God condemned this pagan practice along with child sacrifice, fortune telling, sorcery, necromancy, and magic (Deut. 18:10-12). God's people were to find their security about the future in trusting God and His revealed Word (Isa. 8:19-20). Disobeying God's commands was no less reprehensible in God's sight than paganism.

The Hebrew word rendered **defiance** ("stubbornness," KJV; "presumption," ESV; "arrogance," NIV) literally means "pushing back." It denotes pushing back at God and His commands in favor of one's own desires and preferences. Consequently, it is an act of **wickedness and idolatry**, exalting something or someone—including oneself—above God. Saul had placed his will above God's clear directive.

Samuel delivered the Lord's verdict against Saul: **He has rejected you as king**. Saul's disobedience led to God's replacing him as king. Further, none of Saul's sons would succeed him on the throne. The reign of Saul did not end immediately, but the end was certain. The king and his three sons ultimately were killed in the same battle (1 Sam. 31:1-6).

God expects wholehearted obedience from His people. This was true for Saul; it is true for followers of Christ today as well. Jesus told His disciples, "If you love Me, you will keep My commands" (John 14:15; see also 1 John 5:3-4). May we never try to substitute religious rituals or our own agendas for sincere obedience.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Divination and Magic" on pages 433-434 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What harm may come if we look to something other than to the Lord for guidance? What are some practices in today's culture that resemble divination? How can they be avoided?

ANOINTED!

God desires people who seek to follow Him with all their hearts.

I must confess that I'm an avid college football fan. My wife and I hold season tickets at Georgia Tech (my alma mater) for two seats located directly in front of the home team's goal line. On game day, we dress in school colors and head for the stadium. We stand and yell as the players race onto the field. We join the home crowd in singing the school fight song at the top of our lungs a dozen times or so during every game. Whether our team wins or loses that day, my wife and I are sure to be found in our seats at the next home game, ready to yell, sing, and cheer again.

I have observed through the years that some fans lose interest if their favorite team suffers two or three losses early in the season. Some even shift their loyalty and start cheering for another team that still has a chance to win the championship. On the other hand, some fans are die-hard supporters of their favorite teams year after year, regardless of the school's win-and-loss record. These fans retain a passionate loyalty to the school and its team. Which of these patterns best describes you?

Similar patterns can be detected sometimes in the behavior of God's people regarding their local churches. Some individuals remain enthusiastic and active in the life of their faith-community as long as things are going well. But when difficulties arise or favorite interests are no longer the center of attention within the fellowship, some believers quickly start looking for a new church or, worse, stop attending altogether. The Lord seeks people who follow Him with all their heart both in good times and challenging times.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 SAMUEL 16:1-23

At some time before the Israelites crossed the Jordan River and began their conquest of the promised land, waves of a seafaring people called the Philistines landed on the southwestern shores of Canaan. The Philistines

already had built trading outposts along the coast, but now their purpose was to occupy Canaan permanently. As the Israelites took control of their allotted tribal territories, conflict with the Philistines was certain to occur. Indeed, the Philistines remained a serious threat to Israel throughout the time of Samuel and the reign of Saul.

From a strictly human standpoint, the Philistines enjoyed major advantages over most of their rivals, including Israel. First, the Philistines possessed an advantage in weapons technology. They had weapons of iron, whereas Israelite warriors still relied on wood, leather, and bronze weapons. Second, the Philistines deployed a large chariot force, giving them terrifying mobility on the battlefield. Third, the Philistines possessed a cohesive political structure that could draft, train, and command an effective fighting force. Meanwhile, Saul had to constantly muster and patch together tribal militias even after he was proclaimed king. The biblical writer pointed out that Israel's "conflict with the Philistines was fierce all of Saul's days" (1 Sam. 14:52).

In addition to the external threat from the Philistines, Israel's experiment with human kingship was taking a bad turn. To be sure, Saul commanded the Israelites to a number of battle victories. However, God knew—and revealed the sad news to His prophet Samuel—that Saul lacked the most important quality for an Israelite king. Saul was not wholehearted in his faith in the Lord. Time and again the king refused to be fully obedient to the Lord's commands (13:13-14; 15:17-19). Saul's failure pushed Samuel into despondency.

First Samuel 16 reveals that Israel's true King, the Lord God, was neither despondent nor thrown off course by Saul's failure. He already had chosen a new king and was ready to send His prophet to Bethlehem to anoint the individual (16:1-5).

At a sacrificial assembly in Bethlehem, seven sons of a man of Judah named Jesse appeared before Samuel. Each one impressed Samuel as being an excellent choice to be Israel's next leader, but none of them was the Lord's chosen king (16:6-10). Samuel learned that the Lord used a different criterion than he did; the Lord was looking at the individual's heart-attitude.

The rejection of Jesse's seven older sons cleared the way for Samuel to meet and anoint the youngest son, David, who was indeed the Lord's choice (16:11-13). Once Samuel anointed David, the Holy Spirit took control of the young man from that day forward.

Meanwhile, the Spirit had left Saul, and the king became tormented by an evil spirit (16:14-23). Saul's advisers recommended that someone be brought in to play music that would calm the troubled king. One of the king's servants knew that David was gifted in playing the lyre. Providentially, David was then brought into Saul's court. Saul became so impressed with the young man's abilities that he soon made David the king's armor-bearer as well.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

SAMUEL'S ASSIGNMENT (1 Sam. 16:4-5)

Directed by God, Samuel went to Bethlehem to anoint one of Jesse's sons as the future king. Samuel's unexpected arrival in the area startled the town's elders. Their anxiety receded, however, when the prophet proclaimed a community worship service.

VERSE 4

Samuel did what the LORD directed and went to Bethlehem. When the elders of the town met him, they trembled and asked, "Do you come in peace?"

Samuel initially hesitated when the Lord instructed him to go to Bethlehem and anoint one of Jesse's sons as king (16:1-3). The nature of ritual anointing ensured that it would eventually become public knowledge, even if only a few people witnessed the actual event. Anointing was a procedure whereby olive oil was smeared on a select individual as a sign of divine affirmation and empowerment for service (see 10:1).

Samuel feared that Saul would hear about the prophet's real purpose in visiting Bethlehem, would regard the anointing of a new king as an act of treason, and would kill Samuel in retaliation. However, the Lord reassured His prophet by instructing Samuel to undertake the mission as a worship service for the community. Samuel was authorized to offer sacrifices, so offering a sacrifice in a local community was neither unprecedented nor unlawful.

With this needed assurance, **Samuel did what the LORD directed and went to Bethlehem.** *Bethlehem* was a town located approximately five miles south of Jerusalem. At the time, Jerusalem was still occupied by the Jebusites (Judg. 1:21; 2 Sam. 5:6). Hence, Bethlehem was a strategic Israelite settlement in the area.

The elders were the leaders of the clans and families in the town and surrounding region. The word rendered *elders* is derived from the Hebrew word for beard. It literally means "old men"—that is, men whose full, graying beards signified their age, wisdom, and authority. In its plural form, the word became a technical term for local governing councils, both at the tribal level and the clan, or family, level. Although Israel now had a king in Saul, day-to-day governance would not become rigidly centralized until the reign of Solomon (see 1 Kings 4:1-6). In the time of Samuel, leaders of the various family groups gathered regularly at the town gate to hear cases and make decisions that affected the community.

The great prophet's arrival in Bethlehem was unexpected, so it provoked fear and uncertainty in the elders. **They trembled** and asked if Samuel had come **in peace**. The text does not state the precise reason the elders reacted this way. Did they interpret Samuel's arrival with a young cow to sacrifice (see 1 Sam. 16:2) as a sign of an impending threat either from an enemy or from divine judgment? Perhaps. Another possible explanation is that the elders of Bethlehem were aware of the discord between Samuel and King Saul. Thus, they were terrified that Samuel's visit might bring Saul's retribution against their community.

VERSE 5

“In peace,” he replied. “I’ve come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.” Then he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

Samuel eased the elders' fear with a single Hebrew word, *shalom* [shah LOHM]. This term is rendered **in peace** (“peaceably,” KJV, ESV) both here and in the previous verse. In Israelite culture, the concept of *shalom* involved much more than the absence of strife. Its basic meaning was “to be complete or whole.” Most of the occurrences of the term in the Old Testament refer to an internal harmony that results from an awareness of the Lord's presence. That is, because the Lord is its source, true peace develops as the consequence of His covenant activity and righteousness.

Having assured the elders that his visit did not entail harm for Bethlehem, Samuel declared his intent **to sacrifice to the LORD**. It would be a worship service designed to honor and renew loyalty to Israel's covenant God, Yahweh. The English term *the LORD* printed in this way indicates that in the Hebrew text God's sacred covenant name appears (see Ex. 3:13-15).

What type of *sacrifice* did Samuel intend to offer? Given the context, it might have been a fellowship offering (see Lev. 3:1-17). In a fellowship offering, the best portions of meat were burned on the altar and thus “consumed” by the Lord. The rest of the meat was cooked and eaten by the officiating priest and the worshipers. This sacrifice signified having intimate communion with the Lord God by sharing a meal with Him.

In preparation for the ceremony, Samuel issued instructions for the elders and an invitation for their attendance. The command to **consecrate** (“sanctify,” KJV) themselves referred to the activity of ritual cleansing. The specific measures involved in such a ritual are uncertain. Presumably the ritual included bathing, putting on clean garments, abstaining from sexual activity, and avoiding contact with unclean objects. Samuel's command stressed that individuals needed to prepare themselves to worship the Lord.

While Samuel's directive included external preparation, internal spiritual preparation was the ultimate goal. In Psalm 24:3-4, Israel's psalmist declared that the one who could rightfully appear in the Lord's sanctuary had both "clean hands" (actions) and "a pure heart" (attitude). Centuries later, Jesus described those who kept the external rules but neglected spiritual transformation as "whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside ... are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matt. 23:27-28).

For believers, seeking to follow the Lord wholeheartedly moves us beyond just going through the motions of worship attendance and other religious activities. It requires allowing God's Spirit to change our hearts so that we take on a radically new way of thinking and acting. God's ways do not conform to human logic or tradition.

Whereas Samuel commanded the elders to consecrate themselves, he personally consecrated Jesse's family. The special attention given to **Jesse and his sons** demonstrated Samuel's complete obedience in carrying out his assignment. His assignment required him to fully comply with God's revelation. Anointing one of Jesse's sons would propel Jesse and his family into a very precarious standing. Although the son was slated to become king, he would not immediately ascend to the throne. Saul would continue to reign as king until his death. The new king's future would rest in the hands of God—and God alone.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Clean, Cleanness" on pages 308-310 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. In what ways can believers consecrate themselves in preparation for worship? What would you say is the relationship between having "clean hands" (actions) and a "pure heart"?

GOD'S CRITERIA (1 Sam. 16:6-10)

Samuel's primary task in Bethlehem was anointing the man God had selected to become king. After being reminded that the one who would be king would need to follow the Lord wholeheartedly, Samuel reviewed seven of Jesse's sons. God selected none of them.

VERSE 6

When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and said, "Certainly the LORD's anointed one is here before Him."

Samuel did not yet know which son God had selected as king. Consequently, the prophet began searching for the best candidate using his own criteria. Unfortunately, personal criteria led Samuel to the wrong conclusion. Human intellect alone is always inadequate for determining divine arrangements (Prov. 3:5). The Lord's thoughts are higher than human thoughts (Isa. 55:8-9).

Samuel **saw Eliab** [ih LIGH ab] and concluded right away that this son must be **the LORD's anointed one**. Evidently Samuel was quite impressed with Eliab's physical stature, a feature the prophet previously had emphasized regarding Saul (1 Sam. 10:23-24). However, Samuel's assignment was to identify and anoint the man whom God already had selected, not to choose someone as king according to human standards.

We are often tempted today to evaluate others purely by external appearances—physical looks, abilities, wealth, and the like. One of my teachers in seminary once told of having to own up to his personal biases. He had been shunning an individual that he simply didn't want to be around. Then one day he admitted that the individual was someone whom God loved and for whom Christ had died. From that moment on, he saw that individual (and others like the person) not just on the outside but from the heart.

VERSE 7

But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or his stature, because I have rejected him. Man does not see what the LORD sees, for man sees what is visible, but the LORD sees the heart.”

Before Samuel could pour oil on Eliab's head, the Lord interrupted and spoke. Whenever God's people head in a wrong direction because of a lack of information, God often reveals new insight to correct their course.

The Hebrew verb rendered **do not look** (“do not consider,” NIV) is a different term than the more common verb translated **see** and **sees** in the second half of the verse. The term *look* suggests sustained consideration, contemplation, or study. In other words, God knew that Samuel was focusing on human criteria, features such as physical **appearance** (“countenance,” KJV) and **stature** (“height,” NIV). The term rendered *stature* pointed to a person's height but also could include characteristics such as physique and skin tone. However, none of these features guaranteed—then or now—that an individual would govern in a godly way.

The language of God's rebuff—**I have rejected him**—was not so much an indictment of Eliab as it was of the human tendency to value external qualities over spiritual (heart) devotion. Deciding issues only by human reason or physical presentation rarely results in wise spiritual choices!

The words **for man sees what is visible, but the LORD sees the heart** are the crux of this passage. God is infinitely greater than humanity. Human beings can see the created universe; they can see the people and events around them. What they often cannot—or will not—see is the underlying truth and purpose (the why) behind *what is visible*. God’s actions are based on wisdom inaccessible to human beings unless He reveals it to them (see John 14:26; 1 Cor. 1:24-25).

The cross of Jesus and gospel preaching are prime examples of God’s methodology (1 Cor. 1:18–2:5). Who could have conceived of a plan for sinners’ salvation involving the crucifixion and resurrection of God’s Son? Who would have thought to couple God’s grace with simple faith as the door into this salvation? Finally, who would have chosen gospel preaching by believers to be the effective method of proclaiming salvation to a lost world? The answer to all these questions is this: only the Lord God.

The use of the Hebrew term for *heart* in 1 Samuel 16:7 was not merely for poetic purposes. When people make definitive, life-impacting decisions, the process affects their cardiovascular system. Blood pressure rises and the heart rate increases. The individual experiences a physical sensation in the chest. Therefore, the idea is that God not only sees what people do but also perceives the motivation behind their choices.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Memorize 1 Samuel 16:7b. Then read Deuteronomy 6:4-5; 30:16-18; Psalms 15:1-5; 24:3-4; 51:10,17; 119:10-11; Proverbs 3:5; Jeremiah 4:14; 17:9-10; and Matthew 15:18-19; 22:34-40. What insights do these passages give you concerning 1 Samuel 16:7b?

VERSE 8

Jesse called Abinadab and presented him to Samuel. “The LORD hasn’t chosen this one either,” Samuel said.

Jesse’s second son, **Abinadab** [uh BIN uh dab], appeared before Samuel. The compliance of Jesse’s sons with their father’s instructions indicates these young men kept the Commandment calling for children to honor their parents (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16). The statement that the Lord had not **chosen this** [son] **either** demonstrated that Samuel now listened carefully for God’s evaluation. The text does not indicate precisely how Samuel discerned God’s will in this process. Possibly Samuel became confident that the Lord would reveal His “yes” only when the chosen son appeared before the prophet.

VERSES 9-10

Then Jesse presented Shammah, but Samuel said, “The LORD hasn’t chosen this one either.” After Jesse presented seven of his sons to him, Samuel told Jesse, “The LORD hasn’t chosen any of these.”

A third son, **Shammah** [SHAM uh], was brought before Samuel; he also was rejected. Next a fourth son came, and then a fifth. In all, **seven of** [Jesse’s] **sons** were presented to Samuel. In each case, God disclosed that He had not chosen that son. For the reader of Scripture (and perhaps for Samuel as well), the situation mixed anticipation with bewilderment. Where was the new king if not among these seven sons?

DAVID’S SELECTION (1 Sam. 16:11-13)

Samuel learned that Jesse had one other son, his youngest, who at the time was in the field tending the sheep. This son appeared before Samuel, and the Lord identified David as the one Samuel was to anoint as king. As soon as Samuel anointed David, the Holy Spirit took control of the young man.

VERSE 11

Samuel asked him, “Are these all the sons you have?” “There is still the youngest,” he answered, “but right now he’s tending the sheep.” Samuel told Jesse, “Send for him. We won’t sit down to eat until he gets here.”

Samuel was faced with a perplexing situation. Had he misunderstood God’s guidance from the start? Had he failed to perceive God’s “yes” with regard to any of the seven sons? Samuel realized, however, that there was one other possibility: Jesse might have additional sons. Samuel’s question (“**Are these all the sons you have?**”) revealed this was indeed the case.

Jesse’s **youngest** son, David, happened to be **tending the sheep** at the time. The Hebrew word rendered *youngest* literally means “the small (or insignificant) one.” In a patriarchal family, the youngest of multiple sons could easily feel overlooked or unimportant at times. Jesse and his sons had been personally invited to attend a sacred assembly, yet David had been left behind to tend the sheep. Nevertheless, Samuel instructed Jesse to **send for** his youngest son, vowing the assembly would not proceed until David arrived.

Why was David initially excluded from the sacred service? Some Bible students have suggested the reason was David’s young age. The Scripture does not reveal David’s age until 2 Samuel 5:4, where he was said to be 30 years old when he began to reign as king. In 1 Samuel 17:33, King Saul referred to

David as a “youth,” but the Hebrew term Saul used in that verse could refer to any age from childhood to young adulthood. Thus, another possibility is that David was initially excluded from the sacred assembly because his job was considered too important to leave unattended. In ancient times, sheep were a major source and indication of a family’s wealth. To leave one’s flocks unguarded invited human and animal predators to steal or kill the sheep.

Indeed, David’s commitment to faithfully tending the sheep foreshadowed his upcoming reign as king. Moreover, in Ezekiel 34:23-24 that prophet looked back upon David’s reign as God’s promise to one day send the Messiah as the ultimate Shepherd and King of His people. Of this promise, Jesus later said, “I am the good shepherd [who] ... lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Jesus was (and is) the King of kings who was given “the throne of His father David” (Luke 1:32; see also 1 Pet. 2:25; Rev. 19:16).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Shepherd” on pages 1484-1485 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What characteristics of a faithful shepherd would also be qualities of a good leader? What characteristics of Jesus Christ inspire you to follow Him as the Good Shepherd?

VERSE 12

So Jesse sent for him. He had beautiful eyes and a healthy, handsome appearance. Then the LORD said, “Anoint him, for he is the one.”

The description of David as **healthy** (“ruddy,” KJV, ESV; “glowing with health,” NIV) could mean either that his hair had a red tint or that he had a bronze complexion. He had **beautiful eyes** (“a beautiful countenance,” KJV; “a fine appearance,” NIV) and a **handsome appearance** (“goodly to look to,” KJV). However, Samuel already had learned that such attractive physical attributes did not necessarily qualify David to become king. The prophet waited for the one qualification only the Lord could know and reveal.

Then the LORD said, “Anoint him, for he is the one.” God spoke and identified David as the one He had chosen to become king. No doubt Samuel anticipated the implications of pouring the oil on the young man’s head. However, God’s revealed instructions and affirmation ensured that the reign of Saul would end and David’s reign would be established. Samuel’s act of anointing David would be the result of obedience, not conjecture. God had kept His promise to reveal to His prophet the king after His own heart.

VERSE 13

So Samuel took the horn of oil, anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and the Spirit of the LORD took control of David from that day forward. Then Samuel set out and went to Ramah.

Samuel obeyed God and **anointed** David as Israel's next ruler. The phrase **in the presence of his brothers** may imply the anointing was done only within the family circle. More likely, however, the phrase simply notes that David's seven older brothers were present when Samuel anointed David. In time, their youngest brother would take on a new position as their king.

As evidence of God's approval and empowerment of David for the kingship, **the Spirit of the LORD took control of** ("came upon," KJV; "rushed upon," ESV; "came powerfully upon," NIV) **David from that day forward**. The Holy Spirit's empowering role in the Old Testament was often described as the Spirit's "coming upon" an individual or individuals to accomplish specific tasks. In the New Testament era following the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, the Spirit would not only be poured out upon believers but would permanently live in them (see Acts 2:16-17; Rom. 8:9-11). He works within believers to develop their Christian character. He bestows spiritual gifts for them to serve God through the church. His presence seals them until the day of final redemption.

After the anointing, Samuel left Bethlehem to return to his home in **Ramah**. He had concluded his God-given assignment. This would by no means, however, conclude the role of Bethlehem in God's plan. Hundreds of years later the prophet Micah would write: "Bethlehem Ephrathah [EF ruh thuh], you are small among the clans of Judah; One will come from you to be ruler over Israel for Me. His origin is from antiquity, from eternity" (Mic. 5:2). The "One" whom Micah foresaw coming out of Bethlehem as the Messiah-King was Jesus Christ (see Matt. 2:4-6; Luke 2:4-7).

The anointing of David teaches us that God desires people who seek to follow Him with all their hearts. He expects those whom He raises up to lead His people to first be wholehearted followers. No one can effectively lead others to follow Christ who is not first a faithful follower of Christ.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Bethlehem" on pages 193-195 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What does it mean to you that both David and Jesus Christ were associated with a small, unlikely village? How have you seen the Lord use "unlikely" people in great ways in His kingdom work?

DELIVERED

God uses faithful servants to deliver His people.

A huge army base lies adjacent to the city where I live. Consequently, a lot of military families make their homes in neighborhoods throughout our city. A few years ago some chaplains at the base invited area pastors to tour the post, hoping the experience would help the pastors gain a better understanding of army life and the needs of military families. The day even included opportunities to take part voluntarily in a few military training exercises. One exercise I won't soon forget involved jumping off a tower more than thirty feet high and sliding down a zip line to the ground. In other words, we were given the chance to experience paratrooper training!

This wasn't my first time on a zip line, so I thought it would be a cakewalk. In fact, I imagined the other pastors would surely be amazed by my skill. I confidently strapped on the harness and climbed the tower steps. Up in the jump box, my turn came. I waddled to the opening and halted there until the instructor checked my line and tapped me on the back—the signal to jump.

Then I made a mistake. I looked down. The tower hadn't looked half as high from the ground as it did from the perch! I felt the tap, but I couldn't move. A second tap came, yet I still couldn't muster the courage to leap. As the instructor reached to pull me out of line I finally took a deep breath and launched off the ledge. Gravity seized control, and I dropped like a rock. Then the harness line jerked tight, stretched, recoiled, and finally sent me slipping down the line. The ride was over in a few seconds. My feet hit the ground running as momentum carried me into the clutches of two waiting soldiers.

Later I pondered why I had been so afraid this time. The instructor had assured me the jump was safe. My past experience told me it would be OK. None of the people in line ahead of me had been injured. Yet I had frozen in fear and almost forfeited a thrilling “victory.”

Similarly, how many great spiritual victories might we miss because of crippling fear? Scripture tells us we can have confidence in God. God has been with us in the past. We have seen what God has done in and through the lives of other believers. Therefore, let us boldly stand against those who oppose God. God will deliver His faithful people for the honor of His name.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 SAMUEL 17:1-58

Soon after his anointing by Samuel, David was conscripted to serve on King Saul's staff, first as a personal musician and then as an armor-bearer (16:14-22). Later, however, David appeared to have been called on when needed and otherwise allowed to return home to his duties (see 17:15). In these early encounters between David and Saul, the deeply troubled king could at one point be impressed with David (16:21) and then later be unaware of who David was (17:55-56). The events of chapter 17 would clarify Saul's confusion.

The Israelites witnessed at this time a resurgence in the Philistines' aggression. Philistine troops advanced into the central hill country of Judah. Saul's army established a strong defensive line about fifteen miles west of Bethlehem, blocking any deeper penetration by the enemy. Dug in on two opposing hills, the two armies were locked in a standoff (17:1-2).

The Philistines sought to break the stalemate by proposing a hand-to-hand contest between each army's best warrior (17:3-11). Goliath, the Philistine champion, stood more than nine feet tall and was armored from head to foot. He wielded a huge sword and an iron-tipped spear. The mere sight of Goliath terrified the Israelite soldiers; not one of them volunteered to fight him.

David's three oldest brothers served in the Israelite army, but David remained at home, taking care of his father's herds. From time to time, David's father sent him to the Israelite camp with a supply of food for the brothers and their officers (17:12-19). On one such occasion, David heard Goliath's loud, boastful challenge and inquired about how King Saul might reward anyone who fought and killed the giant warrior. Eliab scolded his younger brother for being arrogant and wanting to see the battle (17:20-30).

Nevertheless, Saul heard about David's inquiry and summoned the young man. Despite the king's hesitation because of David's youth and inexperience, David convinced Saul to let him challenge the Philistine giant (17:31-40). Taking only his shepherd's staff, a sling, and five smooth stones, David approached the enemy, believing that the battle Israel was engaged in had deep significance. Goliath's arrogant challenge defied the Lord's status as the true, living God. Therefore, the Lord would protect David and bring down the Philistine giant (17:41-47).

In the name of the Lord, David struck Goliath in the forehead with a stone, toppling the giant and then beheading him with the Philistine's own sword (17:48-51). The Israelites then charged the scattering enemy forces, killing many and driving the rest back to their cities (17:52-54). Neither Saul nor his commander knew who David's father was, so David told them (17:55-58).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

CONFIDENCE IN GOD (1 Sam. 17:32-37)

These verses describe the initial conversation between David and King Saul. When questioned about his credentials to fight Goliath, David pointed to previous experiences of defeating large predators and expressed confidence in God to empower him to defeat Goliath.

VERSE 32

David said to Saul, “Don’t let anyone be discouraged by him; your servant will go and fight this Philistine!”

David admonished his king not to let the army of Israel **be discouraged** (“lose heart,” NIV) by the Philistine giant’s verbal intimidation. Israel’s soldiers had lost their courage, and David aspired to revive their fighting spirit. But words alone would not eliminate the enemy’s champion. Someone had to fight Goliath in the name of the Lord.

David’s self-identification as Saul’s **servant** expressed more than proper protocol. David already had been anointed as Israel’s next king (16:13), yet he would never waver in his personal loyalty to Saul. He would await God’s timing for the transition of power to happen. In the meantime, David would serve the current king faithfully and bravely. David would **go and fight this Philistine**.

VERSE 33

But Saul replied, “You can’t go fight this Philistine. You’re just a youth, and he’s been a warrior since he was young.”

Saul was a tall, seasoned warrior himself. He had constantly recruited strong, brave men in his battles against the Philistines (14:52). Now here before him stood a ruddy **youth** with nothing but a shepherd’s stick and a slingshot, volunteering to face off against a towering, lethal, well-armed **Philistine** who had **been a warrior since he was young** (“from his youth,” KJV).

We do not know precisely what age David was, but if age 20 was the minimum age for an Israelite soldier (see Num. 1:3), then David may have been in his late teens. Goliath was years older than David and presumably more experienced in hand-to-hand combat. Saul may have equated David’s confidence with the teenage sense of invincibility. In any case, the king immediately rejected David’s offer. From the standpoint of human evaluation, Saul could not imagine David fighting—much less defeating—Goliath.

VERSES 34-35

David answered Saul: “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.

Although he was a shepherd and not a soldier, David was no stranger to fighting off vicious predators. For that reason David boldly spoke again and laid out his credentials to the king. In the process, he underscored why later prophets often referred to Israel’s leaders as the “shepherds” of God’s people (see Jer. 3:15; Ezek. 34:1-6; Zech. 10:3). They were to be bold, but even more they were to trust in the Lord.

Shepherds were responsible for safeguarding their flocks from various hazards, including wild beasts. The docile, wandering nature of sheep often made them easy prey. In David’s time, the two largest wild predators in the region were the **lion** and the **bear**. Lions that David might have encountered likely were similar in size to African lions. Bears in the region probably were Syrian bears, a smaller variety of the brown bear that nevertheless could weigh up to five hundred pounds and stand six feet high when upright. (Neither animal survives in the wild in Israel today.) Both types of predators were quick and stealthy; they posed serious dangers not only to sheep but also to shepherds.

The word **whenever** (“there came,” KJV; “when,” ESV, NIV) indicates David had real-life experience fighting such predators in close combat. He wasn’t dreaming of a fanciful, imaginary battle. He described his brave strategy of taking the fight to the beast (**I went after it**). He would **grab it by its fur** (“beard,” KJV; “hair,” NIV), **strike it down, and kill it**.

VERSE 36

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.”

Asserting that he had **killed lions and bears**, David believed he would have similar success against Goliath. The derogatory phrase **uncircumcised Philistine** had two emphases. One, Goliath was a pagan idolater, not a member of the Abrahamic covenant community (Gen. 17:10-11). Hence, this enemy could not expect help from the Lord as David could. Second, the phrase emphasized that the Philistine’s brutish behavior was no different from that of *lions and bears*. Goliath would receive the same fate as those beasts.

David realized as well that a greater war was being waged above and beyond the current battle. Goliath hadn't simply challenged Saul's army or Israel's army. He had **defied the armies of the living God**. Goliath's taunting of the Israelite army equated to defying Israel's God. David rightly discerned that the Lord God was fully engaged in this battle against the Philistines. The Lord's name and glory were at stake. A victory by Goliath would seem to be a victory—albeit temporary—for worthless idols and for the forces of evil and ungodliness. A victory for Israel, especially a victory won by the most unlikely champion on the battlefield, would prove once again the truth of what Samuel's mother had once prayed: "There is no one holy like the LORD. There is no one besides [Him]! And there is no rock like our God" (1 Sam. 2:2).

VERSE 37

Then David said, "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." Saul said to David, "Go, and may the LORD be with you."

David's boast did not derive from youthful arrogance. A biblical principle declares that victory is derived from God's Spirit, not from human ability or material resources (Zech. 4:6). David affirmed that his previous successes against fierce predators had come from **the LORD**, Israel's faithful God. David's logic was pure and straightforward. God had delivered him from death when the life of a sheep was at stake. How much more would God deliver His servant when God's own reputation had been blasphemed! At that moment the young shepherd exemplified the confidence that genuine faith in God produces when combined with humility regarding one's own ability.

Saul could not argue with David's determination or logic. No doubt he was moved by the young man's faith in the Lord, for Saul agreed to let David proceed. He uttered a prayer-blessing for **the LORD [to] be with** David. Further, Saul attempted to equip the young man with his armor and sword, but David could not walk in Saul's armor. David chose instead to take only his shepherd's staff, sling, and five smooth stones as weapons (17:38-40).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read 2 Corinthians 12:1-10. What correlation do you see between the principle Paul stated in 12:9-10—that is, God's power is manifested through the believer's weakness—and David's confidence in facing Goliath? When have you found this principle to be true in your life?

FALSE CONFIDENCE IN HIMSELF (1 Sam. 17:42-44)

These verses describe Goliath's reaction when he saw the youthful David coming out to fight him. Goliath viewed David as an unworthy opponent and declared that the battle would be easily won. The Philistine's confidence rested solely in his own capabilities.

VERSE 42

When the Philistine looked and saw David, he despised him because he was just a youth, healthy and handsome.

Goliath came out from the Philistine ranks and issued his daily taunt. This day, however, a lone figure stepped forward from the Israelite formation to accept the challenge. Goliath carefully appraised his opponent. In the threefold description of David in this verse, the word rendered **youth** could designate an age anywhere between infancy and marriageable manhood—in this case, likely his late teens. The word translated **healthy** (“ruddy,” KJV, ESV) is a derivative of a term meaning “to be red” and may suggest rosy cheeks, reddish hair, or reddish-bronze skin tone. The term rendered **handsome** (“fair countenance,” KJV) literally means “pleasing to look at.” To Goliath, however, these features were an insult. He had dared the Israelites to send out their best warrior for a duel to the death. Instead they sent a boy armed only with a staff and a sling. The Philistine was infuriated!

VERSE 43

He said to David, “Am I a dog that you come against me with sticks?” Then he cursed David by his gods.

Killing a brash shepherd boy offered Goliath no glory, but the Philistine's pride would not allow him to ignore the response to his challenge. So he advanced to meet David. As they drew near to each other, Goliath launched a verbal attack in an effort to intimidate his opponent. He ridiculed David's choice of weapon and **cursed David by his gods**. David was wielding a weapon better used to fend off **a dog**. Most canines at this time were not pets; they ran wild and ate as scavengers. People constantly drove dogs away from their houses **with sticks**.

The Hebrew verb rendered *cursed* means “to make of little worth” or “to make contemptible.” The same verb occurs in Genesis 12:3, where it is rendered “treat ... with contempt.” In that verse God promised to “curse” anyone who treated Abraham or his descendants with contempt. Here Goliath treated David, Abraham's descendant, with contempt. Therefore the Philistine's verbal assault made Goliath the object of God's curse!

Goliath's cursing David *by his gods* again underscored that this battle would be much more than combat between two human opponents. In a cosmic sense it would be combat between the Lord God of Israel and the false gods of Philistia. We've already seen one of the more dramatic episodes of this cosmic struggle in 1 Samuel 4–6 (Session 3). When the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant and placed it near the false god's statue in the temple of Dagon [DAY gahn], the idol twice was found having fallen from its pedestal and lying face down before the Lord's ark (see 5:1-5).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "False Worship" on pages 554-556 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Besides the practice of pagan or idolatrous cults, how can false worship become a problem for those who claim to worship the one true God? What are ways that you see the cosmic fight between God and evil going on in the world today? What resources can the believer rely on to stand against the forces that oppose Christ?

In Ephesians 6:11-12, the apostle Paul warned believers of the same truth that David realized. Paul urged believers to "put on the full armor of God" because they are ultimately engaged in a battle "against the authorities, against the world powers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens." But with the Lord's powerful presence and by wearing His impenetrable armor, we as believers will be "more than victorious through Him who loved us" (Rom. 8:37).

VERSE 44

"Come here," the Philistine called to David, "and I'll give your flesh to the birds of the sky and the wild beasts!"

Goliath threatened to butcher David and to leave his mangled corpse on the field as carrion for scavengers. The words **come here** beckoned David to dare to move within range of Goliath's weapons.

In Old Testament times, one characteristic of an ideal life was longevity. Goliath's threat, if successfully carried out, would deprive David of that long life. Another characteristic was burial alongside one's ancestors at the conclusion of life. Goliath promised that if he defeated David, the young upstart's dismembered body would be left on the battlefield for the **birds of the sky** (that is, vultures) **and the wild beasts** to devour. To the ancient Israelite, such a fate would be more than abhorrent.

GOD'S VICTORY (1 Sam. 17:45-50)

This section contains two parts. Part one recounts David's reply to Goliath's attempt to intimidate him (17:45-47). David declared his confidence in God to give victory and declared that God's power would be made known. Part two narrates the actual battle between David and Goliath (17:48-50). God used David to kill Goliath and to provide deliverance for Israel from the Philistines.

VERSE 45

David said to the Philistine: “You come against me with a dagger, spear, and sword, but I come against you in the name of Yahweh of Hosts, the God of Israel’s armies—you have defied Him.

David's response to Goliath's threats included an accurate appraisal of the giant warrior. Goliath was armed with a triad of weapons, **a dagger** (“sword,” KJV, ESV, NIV), **spear, and sword** (“shield,” KJV; “javelin,” ESV, NIV). The weapon rendered *dagger* probably referred to a short, double-edged sword used in stabbing an enemy in close combat. The *spear* was a versatile weapon that could be thrown at a distance or thrust at close range. Just the lethal iron tip of Goliath's spear weighed 15 pounds (17:7)! Bible translators have differed in their understanding of Goliath's third weapon. Some take it to be another type of *sword* (HCSB); others understand it to be a dart, or javelin (ESV, NIV). Still others believe the Hebrew term refers to a type of shield (KJV). Whatever the case, Goliath was armed to the teeth and ready to kill.

Goliath charged toward David with insulting curses on his lips and deadly weapons in his hands. In contrast, David calmly approached his attacker **in the name of Yahweh of Hosts** (“the LORD of hosts,” KJV, ESV; “the LORD Almighty,” NIV). In Israelite culture, a name was far more than a label of identification. It embodied the essential nature of the person. The name *Yahweh* (“the LORD”) is God's covenant name (see Ex. 3:13-14). It is an intimate revelation of His character and, as such, summons the hearer to wholehearted reverence, submission, and faith.

Because He is infinite, God cannot be fully grasped by finite human beings. Yet He has revealed His true nature to us through His words and deeds. His supreme self-revelation to human beings was in the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. Thus, any revelation of His name evokes some response, either faith in Him or rejection of Him.

The phrase *of Hosts* was a military term that affirmed the Lord as the true Commander of Israel's army. In addition, the phrase affirms that the Lord has an army of angels ready and able to do His bidding (see 2 Kings 6:15-17). Thus, *Yahweh of Hosts* was a most exalted title that expressed God's absolute sovereignty over His creation. David was a warrior in the Lord's army.

VERSE 46

Today, the LORD will hand you over to me. Today, I'll strike you down, cut your head off, and give the corpses of the Philistine camp to the birds of the sky and the creatures of the earth. Then all the world will know that Israel has a God,

David announced that Goliath's blasphemy was over. His life would be terminated that very day. The declaration consisted of two parts, both introduced by the term **today**. The first part consists of the statement **the LORD will hand you over to me**. David was confident of his upcoming victory over Goliath not through self-assurance but by divine assurance. The Lord would get the credit, because the Lord would give the victory.

How tempting it is sometimes for us as God's people to trust more in our own abilities rather than in God's promises. Similarly, when we do great things in God's kingdom work and receive the acclamation of others, how tempting it is to think of ourselves more highly than we should. Humble faith demands that we keep on realizing that we can do all things *only* through Christ who strengthens us (Phil. 4:13). With God all things are possible (Mark 10:27); without Him, we can do nothing (John 15:5).

The second part of David's declaration turned back on Goliath his earlier prediction of David's fate. However, the Philistine, not David, would be the one lying dead and dismembered on the battlefield. Wild scavengers would feast not only on Goliath's corpse but also on **the corpses of the Philistine camp**. That is, since the Lord was giving the victory, all the Israelites would share in it and all the Philistines would taste the bitterness of God's wrath. Moreover, the victory would have a worldwide impact: **All the world will know that Israel has a God**. Although such a confession stops short of acknowledging the Lord as the only true God, it nevertheless points to humanity's ultimate recognition of and submission to the Lord as King of kings (Phil. 2:9-11).

VERSE 47

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."

The impact that David's victory would have on God's people (**this whole assembly**) also had a theological aspect. That is, God's people (including those of us who are studying this Scripture today) would receive a loud and unmistakable message: **It is not by sword or by spear that the LORD saves, for the battle is the LORD's**. Put another way, God does not need

us to provide salvation for ourselves. In fact, we cannot save ourselves. God doesn't need us, but we absolutely need Him! David's battle against Goliath was one scene in a cosmic battle between good and evil—between the forces of heaven and the forces of hell, between God and His enemies—that culminated at the cross of Christ. Jesus' death and resurrection proved in the ultimate way that *the battle is the LORD's*.

VERSES 48-50

When the Philistine started forward to attack him, David ran quickly to the battle line to meet the Philistine. David put his hand in the bag, took out a stone, slung it, and hit the Philistine on his forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the ground. David defeated the Philistine with a sling and a stone. Even though David had no sword, he struck down the Philistine and killed him.

The moment of truth for David and for Israel had come. Combat in the ancient world commonly was hand-to-hand. The phrase **the battle line** denoted the spot where the two combatants would meet. As David advanced, he reached deftly into his pouch, **took out a stone, slung it, and hit the Philistine on his forehead**. The sling allowed David to strike his opponent first, lethally, and from a greater distance than Goliath could with his heavy weapons. That **the stone sank into** Goliath's skull reveals the damage that could be done by a skilled shepherd **with a sling and a stone**. Moreover, the biblical writer's statement that **David had no sword** pointed back to 17:47 with its emphasis that the battle belongs to the Lord.

David's confidence resided in the one true God. He repeatedly proclaimed God's greatness and trusted in Him completely. Therefore God worked through David to achieve a great victory over the Philistines. Then and now, God always provides the tools His people need to carry out His assignments. What He is looking for are faithful followers who will trust Him wholeheartedly. Confidence in anything other than God ultimately brings fear and defeat.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "David" on pages 391-396 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Why do you think David came to be known as a man after God's heart? Which characteristic of David in this session's Bible passage needs to become more characteristic of you? How can that occur?

FAITHFUL

Godly friendship is built on commitment to God and provides lifelong encouragement.

With a warm, vibrant personality, Kate seemed to attract friends like a sunflower draws butterflies. For a year and a half, Kate described Linda as one of her best friends. Linda was an amateur photographer who showed great talent with a camera. The two women often ate lunch together, and their families sometimes got together for fun on a weekend. Periodically Kate would perform friendly favors for Linda, such as babysitting Linda's preschool-age daughter for a few hours in the evening.

One day Kate told Linda that her husband, Ben, planned to run for local political office and needed a campaign photographer. Kate asked Linda if she would volunteer to help. For the next year Linda sank herself into the project. She did everything at her own expense, because she believed that was what best friends did. On election night Linda attended the gathering at Ben's campaign headquarters. At appropriate moments she snapped publicity photos. Early returns were promising, but as the night wore on the prospect changed. Kate's husband lost the election. For the next couple of weeks, Kate canceled her routine get-togethers with Linda. Within a few weeks, Linda realized that Kate no longer considered her a best friend. In fact, Linda began to wonder if Kate's friendship had ever been truly genuine.

The Bible passage for this session highlights the characteristics of a genuine, godly friendship that developed between David and Jonathan, Saul's son. They could have easily become bitter rivals. Instead they stayed closer than brothers because both were committed to the Lord above all.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 SAMUEL 18:1–20:42

David's defeat of Goliath spurred the Israelite army to victory over the invading Philistines. David became an instant hero. Consequently, Saul

brought David into his court on a permanent basis, commissioning David as an officer in Israel's army. The close proximity of these two men whose opposite destinies Samuel had prophesied created tension that soon erupted into conflict. David's rapid rise toward the kingship and Saul's steady decline are chronicled in 1 Samuel 18:1–31:13. In chapters 18–20, the narrative focuses on personal relationships between David and Saul's family, particularly between David and Jonathan, Saul's son and heir.

As Saul's heir, Jonathan would bear the negative consequences of his father's sad destiny. Yet Jonathan discovered in David a kindred spirit. Both were valiant warriors with unbounded faith in the Lord. The two men developed a strong friendship. On the same day that David killed Goliath, Jonathan made a covenant with David, presenting him with a gift of the prince's royal garments and weapons (18:1-4). This significant act, along with David's continuing military success, soon made David more popular than Saul with the Israelite people, a fact that infuriated the king (18:5-9).

Saul thus began a series of attempts to get rid of David. Driven by fear and acting under the sway of an evil spirit, Saul twice attempted to kill David with a spear inside the palace (18:10-11). Next, the king reassigned David to a risky command in hopes that the young commander might be killed in battle, making the assignment attractive by promising David his oldest daughter in marriage. The king later reneged on his promise (18:12-19).

Saul devised yet another plot when he learned that his daughter Michal [MIGH kuhl] was in love with David (18:20-30). Saul agreed to the marriage with the stipulation that David would first present to the king proof that he had killed one hundred Philistines. The scheme failed to achieve Saul's real goal—David's death—and when David returned with twice the amount of proof required, Saul gave his daughter Michal to David in marriage.

In 1 Samuel 19–20, David and Jonathan's true friendship shone bright against the dark backdrop of Saul's obsessive plots to kill David. The narrative of these two chapters proceeds as follows:

- *Jonathan refused to carry out his father's order to kill David (19:1-7)*—When Saul ordered his son to kill David, Jonathan interceded with the king on David's behalf, reminding Saul of David's bravery and loyalty. Jonathan warned the king that killing David would be a heinous sin.

- *David's wife Michal helped David escape from assassins sent by Saul (19:8-17)*—After David returned to court, Saul once more attempted to murder his son-in-law with a spear. When this failed, the king sent assassins to kill David while he slept. Michal learned of the plot and helped her husband escape.

- *God's Spirit protected David in Ramah with Samuel (19:18-24)*—David sought refuge with the prophet Samuel in Ramah. Three times Saul sent groups of agents to seize David, but the Spirit of God overcame the agents each time.

Saul then decided to go to Ramah personally, but God's Spirit overcame the king as well, humbling Saul in a public display of divine power.

• *Jonathan expanded his covenant with David into a pledge of everlasting friendship between their two families (20:1-42)*—At David's request, Jonathan sought to discover the reason his father was determined to kill David. Jonathan swore to always warn his friend of the king's evil intentions and affirmed that the Lord would protect David. When Jonathan later became a target of his outraged father's spear for defending David, he realized that David would never return to Saul's court. The two friends met secretly, tearfully pledged their everlasting friendship, and parted ways.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

TRUE FRIENDS (1 Sam. 18:1-5)

David's heroic defeat of Goliath got the attention of not only Saul but also Saul's son, Jonathan—a beloved Israelite hero in his own right. Jonathan presented his royal robe and other items to David as a demonstration of his commitment to David. The two men became true friends.

VERSE 1

When David had finished speaking with Saul, Jonathan committed himself to David, and loved him as much as he loved himself.

The events in 1 Samuel 18 followed Saul's interview with David after the death of Goliath (1 Sam. 17:57-58). The text does not state the reason that Jonathan **committed himself to David** ("was knit with the soul of David," KJV; "became one in spirit with David," NIV). Perhaps Jonathan, a military hero himself (see 14:44-45), had a genuine appreciation of David's valor. He found David to be a kindred soul, a brave warrior, and a genuine friend.

As Saul's firstborn son, Jonathan was the heir to the throne in most people's thinking. He discovered in David someone with whom he had much in common. Both Jonathan and David demonstrated great courage through their aggressive combat with the Philistines, Israel's fierce enemy. A profound faith in the Lord shaped both men's character and led to their successes on the battlefield. Jonathan **loved [David] as much as he loved himself**. The king's son showed no jealousy of David but rather developed a deep, moral affection toward his new friend. The two warriors found in each other the godly values and ideals that they did not always find in other people.

VERSE 2

Saul kept David with him from that day on and did not let him return to his father's house.

Saul kept David with him from that day on. Since the time of his anointing, David had come to the king's court to play soothing string music whenever an evil spirit tormented Saul (16:19-23). Nevertheless, David did not stay permanently with Saul at that time. When the Goliath challenge erupted, David was "going back and forth from Saul to tend his father's flock in Bethlehem" (17:15).

What changed? For one thing, Saul wasn't about to release from active duty a warrior with David's potential. There would be more battles with the Philistines to fight. Perhaps a second reason was that Jonathan influenced his father's decision to retain David. In any case, the biblical writer may have wanted to emphasize God's behind-the-scenes work of bringing his chosen king closer and closer to the throne of Israel.

The words **did not let him return to his father's house** highlight one other point as well. The prophet Samuel had warned the people of Israel that a king had the right to conscript Israel's young men into service (8:11-12). David's father, Jesse, now felt the brunt of Samuel's warning. His three oldest sons had already been serving in the army (17:13); now his youngest son was also gone, no doubt creating a hardship for the depleted family.

VERSE 3

Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as much as himself.

A covenant was the ancient equivalent of a legal contract or an international treaty. Jonathan's personal covenant **with David** cemented a strong bond of friendship characterized by mutual affection and loyalty. For the second time in three verses, the biblical writer emphasized that Jonathan **loved** [David] **as much as himself** ("as his own soul," KJV, ESV). While many ancient covenants were written documents, the covenant between Jonathan and David probably was an oral agreement. Their word was their bond.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Memorize 1 Samuel 18:3. Then read the article titled "Covenant" on pages 355-359 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. In what ways is a believer's new covenant relationship with Jesus Christ like and unlike the friendship between Jonathan and David?

VERSE 4

Then Jonathan removed the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his military tunic, his sword, his bow, and his belt.

The covenant between Jonathan and David may have included an exchange of special gifts. If so, the text does not specify what gifts David gave to Jonathan. For his part, Jonathan gave to David a number of personal items that possessed both tangible and symbolic implications. That is, in Jonathan's **robe ... military tunic** ("armor," ESV) **... sword ... bow, and ... belt** ("girdle," KJV), David received the prized garments and weapons of the anticipated heir to Saul's kingdom!

These gifts indicated first of all that Jonathan was offering himself to his friend. These treasured possessions exemplified their giver's sacrifice more than their recipient's need. David already possessed Goliath's sword (17:54). Nevertheless, Jonathan's sword represented a rare and essential Israelite implement of war (13:22). So Jonathan gave his friend an item that was both extremely valuable and personal. Its transmission to David left Jonathan less armed as a warrior. A true friend places another's well-being ahead of his or her own.

The transfer of Jonathan's garments and weapons to David also conveyed important symbolism. Giving royal garments and armaments was a common practice in antiquity that symbolized a transfer of status. Perhaps the crown prince already had begun to recognize that David eventually would become king over Israel. In time Jonathan would acknowledge this fact openly (23:16-17). Whether or not Jonathan knew the full significance of his deed, the giving of these items was prophetic. It pointed to David as God's choice as Israel's next king. A true friend desires God's will above his or her own advancement.

VERSE 5

David marched out with the army and was successful in everything Saul sent him to do. Saul put him in command of the soldiers, which pleased all the people and Saul's servants as well.

Saul quickly commissioned David as an officer in Israel's army. David **was successful** ("behaved himself wisely," KJV) in his new career. The Hebrew verb rendered *was successful* also appears in Deuteronomy 29:9, describing the result of remaining faithful to the covenant with the Lord. David's success was the result of carefully following the Lord's guidance in his life. He was controlled and directed by God's Spirit (1 Sam. 16:13).

Because David repeatedly demonstrated military skill on the battlefield, Saul **put him in command of the soldiers** (“set him over the men of war,” KJV, ESV; “gave him a high rank in the army,” NIV). This phrase may have referred to Saul’s elite troops. The command gave David a high profile position in the nation’s military, and the appointment was met with widespread public approval. A new dimension had been added to David’s preparation for kingship. He was learning to use great authority wisely.

TESTED FRIENDS (1 Sam. 20:35-40)

Between the first section of verses and this one, Saul’s relationship with David turned from admiration to jealousy and resentment (18:8-9), then to fear and loathing spurred on by an evil spirit (18:10-15), and finally to a concerted series of plots to kill David (18:17,25; 19:1,9-11). David fled into hiding at Ramah until he was able to visit Jonathan and ask his friend to intercede for him with the king (19:18–20:17). Jonathan agreed to seek David’s full restoration to the king’s court; further, he devised a secret signal to use if David’s life was still in danger (20:18-34).

VERSE 35

In the morning Jonathan went out to the field for the appointed meeting with David. A small young man was with him.

On a previous occasion, Jonathan had been able to convince his father to stop targeting David and to bring the warrior-hero back into military service (19:4-7). That respite was short-lived, however; it ended when an evil spirit once again took over Saul (19:9). Jonathan’s second attempt to intercede with his father on David’s behalf not only was unsuccessful but also took a violent turn: Saul attempted to kill his own son for supporting David (20:30-34)! Jonathan sadly realized that he needed to signal David to flee.

As planned, **Jonathan went out to the field for the appointed meeting with David** on the day after the new moon celebration (see 20:18-19). The meeting site had been selected because of its proximity to where David was hiding. At the same time, it was an appropriate venue for archery practice. Anyone observing Jonathan would find nothing unusual in his activity.

The phrase **small young man** (“a little lad,” KJV; “a small boy,” NIV) in Hebrew could refer to a male at any age from infancy to adulthood, but typically to one between the years of older boyhood to young adulthood. In some contexts the word could simply denote a servant or attendant. The term *small* could mean either “small in stature” or “insignificant.” The menial task assigned to Jonathan’s attendant suggests that he was an adolescent, one who would not suspect that he was also helping to carry out a signal.

VERSE 36

**He said to the young man, “Run and find the arrows I’m shooting.”
As the young man ran, Jonathan shot an arrow beyond him.**

Being heir to Israel’s throne and a military commander demanded that Jonathan develop a level of skill at archery. Perhaps he had previously spent countless hours practicing in this same field. Arrows were handcrafted ammunition. Retrieving them from the practice range was both economical and expedient. Thus, Jonathan’s attendant was no doubt familiar with his task: to **run and find the arrows** his master had shot. Such instructions would arouse no suspicion from anyone. Only Jonathan and David would understand the coded messages being communicated.

The signal plan called for Jonathan to shoot at targets at various ranges. Hitting a long-distance target entailed shooting an arrow in a high trajectory. This allowed his attendant to run toward a closer target even as Jonathan **shot an arrow beyond him** at a more distant target.

VERSE 37

**He came to the location of the arrow that Jonathan had shot,
but Jonathan called to him and said, “The arrow is beyond you,
isn’t it?”**

The young man raced ahead to the spot where the arrow hit. David hid nearby, anxiously waiting to hear about Saul’s mood. The long shot established a pretext for Jonathan to signal David. By pretending that he thought his shot went farther than it actually did, Jonathan positioned his words into a plausible context. The words **the arrow is beyond you**—secretly overheard by David—signified that David needed to flee quickly from the area.

VERSE 38

**Then Jonathan called to him, “Hurry up and don’t stop!”
Jonathan’s young man picked up the arrow and returned to
his master.**

Jonathan punctuated the warning by shouting, **“Hurry up and don’t stop!”** (“Hurry! Be quick! Do not stay!” ESV). Whereas the young attendant would have assumed his master was urging him to get a move on in retrieving the arrows, David knew that Jonathan was communicating a message about imminent danger. David must not delay his departure.

The **young man**, ignorant of his role in the coded message, quickly **picked up the arrow and returned to his master**. His status is further clarified

by Jonathan's identification as *his master*. The young man was a servant assigned to assist the prince during military training exercises. He may have been Jonathan's armor-bearer, a position David once held for Saul (16:21).

VERSE 39

He did not know anything; only Jonathan and David knew the arrangement.

Jonathan and David successfully kept the true purpose of the archery practice a secret. Only they knew what actually transpired in the field. The servant did not suspect anything out of the ordinary. The episode suggested nothing more than a typical session on the archery range. On the other hand, Jonathan and David understood **the arrangement** ("the matter," KJV).

VERSE 40

Then Jonathan gave his equipment to the young man who was with him and said, "Go, take it back to the city."

Jonathan's instructions for the young man to carry **his equipment** ("his artillery," KJV; "his weapons," ESV, NIV) ... **back to the city** suggested nothing unusual. Carrying the prince's weapons was one of the menial tasks assigned to an attendant. A soldier's *equipment* could include weapons, armor, and other baggage. In this case, it included at least Jonathan's bow, a quiver of arrows, and the leather protective coverings for the archer's fingers and wrists.

Jonathan did not immediately return to the city with his attendant but remained in the field. If the attendant gave this fact any consideration, if he turned back momentarily to observe Jonathan gazing out over the field, then he likely assumed the prince was only evaluating the practice and thinking about ways to improve. For David, however, the significance of Jonathan's actions held a different meaning. Jonathan had disarmed himself, a move that emphasized his benevolent aims toward David. Their friendship, though tested severely by Saul's determined evil, stood firm in the Lord. Still, David and Jonathan would have to bid each other a tearful farewell.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read Jesus' words in John 15:9-17. What are some connections between Jesus' teaching and Jonathan's behavior in 1 Samuel 20:35-40? What are some truths from these passages that you can apply in your life today?

TIMELESS FRIENDS (1 Sam. 20:41-42)

David and Jonathan said their goodbyes and made a commitment that they and their descendants would be friends forever.

VERSE 41

When the young man had gone, David got up from the south side of the stone Ezel, fell with his face to the ground, and bowed three times. Then he and Jonathan kissed each other and wept with each other, though David wept more.

After the **young man** left with Jonathan's equipment, the field appeared empty. Jonathan fixed his eyes on a large rock formation known as **the stone Ezel** [EE zel]. This is where Jonathan had instructed David to hide prior to the archery session so that he could hear and see Jonathan without being detected (20:19). It is perhaps the same location where David hid during Jonathan's first attempt to intercede with Saul for David's life (see 19:2-3). If *Ezel* had any prior (or later) historical significance, that fact is not recorded in Scripture. Even the name is of uncertain meaning. It could have been an ancient memorial stone, a peculiar rock formation, or even an unusual pile of stones. In any case, it was a good hiding place.

Equally uncertain is the significance of David's emerging **from the south side** ("from beside the stone heap," ESV) of the hiding place. Perhaps from that angle David remained shielded from the departing attendant's sight. To be sure, the detail lends suspense and authenticity to the narrative.

The verb rendered **got up** suggests that David either had been crouching or lying prone on the ground as he waited for Jonathan's coded message. We can easily imagine that when David heard Jonathan send the attendant back to the city, the cautious warrior scanned the area for potential threats and slowly stood up. At the same time, David's eyes certainly were drawn to the solitary figure standing in the field, his true friend Jonathan.

As the two men strode toward each other, raw emotion overcame them. They did not know if they would ever see each other again. David **fell with his face to the ground, and bowed three times**. This gesture of utmost respect is found only here in Scripture. Nowhere else does the Bible report one person bowing three times to another individual in a single encounter. On the surface, David's bowing was appropriate protocol for approaching the king's son. Yet in reality David was God's anointed king for Israel's future.

The show of genuine respect was not one-sided. Jonathan expressed his commitment to David by exchanging kisses with him. In ancient (and modern) Middle Eastern cultures, kissing the cheeks of another person expressed a greeting of friendship and hospitality. Jonathan's embrace conveyed his

acceptance of David as a cherished peer. Both were heirs to the throne of Israel—the former by royal inheritance but the latter by divine appointment. Both would come to realize that David’s anointing to the throne superseded Jonathan’s claim (23:17).

The two friends’ gestures of mutual respect brought tears to their eyes. Both men **wept** unashamedly. The indication that **David wept more** reveals the intensity and genuineness of his friendship with Jonathan. Some Bible students have suggested also that this special notation about David’s weeping pointed to his awareness of the two men’s divergent futures. God had said that David would become the next king. Thus, David may have been silently thinking about his friend’s inescapable demise.

VERSE 42

Jonathan then said to David, “Go in the assurance the two of us pledged in the name of the LORD when we said: The LORD will be a witness between you and me and between my offspring and your offspring forever.” Then David left, and Jonathan went into the city.

As the tearful conversation came to a close, Jonathan recalled the true nature of their relationship. They had made a covenant **in the name of the LORD**. To pledge their loyalty to each other in the Lord’s name affirmed their greater loyalty to the God of Israel. The “glue” (**a witness**) that held their friendship strong and true was their common devotion to Israel’s true and faithful God, *the LORD*. Hence, Jonathan emphasized the gravity of his commitment to David and elicited similar commitment from David. Furthermore, the two friends extended the covenant to include their **offspring**. Their descendants would be as committed to one another as were David and Jonathan.

Having pledged their enduring friendship, **David left, and Jonathan went into the city**. The two friends would speak face-to-face only one other time (1 Sam. 23:16-18). Jonathan, along with his father and brothers, died in battle against the Philistines (31:2). David eventually became king of all Israel, and he continued to honor his pledge to Jonathan by bringing his friend’s only surviving son into his household (see 2 Sam. 9).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Friend, Friendship” on page 602 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Based on this study of Jonathan and David’s friendship, what would you say are the key qualities of true friendship?

BLINDED

Personal ambition at the expense of others leads to paranoia and desperate decisions.

Today, the name Benedict Arnold—like the name Judas—is synonymous with one word: betrayal. Many people, however, do not know the full, tragic story of the man who betrayed his country in a time of crisis.

Benedict Arnold became a celebrated American general during the early years of the Revolutionary War. Perhaps only George Washington enjoyed more popularity at the time among American patriots. Arnold was seriously wounded twice during the war. On the second occasion, his personal bravery turned the tide of a key battle at Saratoga, New York, giving the Continental Army a decisive victory over the British troops. That victory persuaded France to support the American colonies in their effort. With the aid of their new ally, the colonies eventually won their independence and became a new nation.

Although bold, Benedict Arnold was also extremely ambitious. He craved military glory. When five junior officers were promoted over him in the months prior to the Battle of Saratoga, he resigned from the army in protest. The Continental Congress quickly awarded Arnold a promotion as well, and he returned to the army in time to become the hero of Saratoga.

After the battle, the wounded Arnold was appointed as the military governor of Philadelphia. He constantly complained that he did not reap the just rewards of his heroic leadership at Saratoga, and he demanded back pay from the Congress. When they refused his demands, Arnold began to use his position as governor to negotiate secret, lucrative deals with agents of the British army. When his treasonous actions were about to be exposed, Arnold pledged his allegiance to England and joined the British army. After the war ended, he fled to England and sought to become a merchant. He died a dejected and despised man two decades later.

Selfish ambition blinds and destroys those who embrace it. Long before Benedict Arnold's treasonous fall in early America, King Saul of Israel made selfish, foolish choices that ultimately brought about his destruction. In this session we will examine how Saul's selfish ambition led to paranoia and to the making of desperate, destructive decisions.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 SAMUEL 21:1–23:29

Jonathan's attempt to intercede with King Saul on behalf of David failed miserably; Saul was determined to kill David (20:30-33). Jonathan and David thus bade each other a tearful goodbye (20:41-42), and David entered a life on the run. The remaining chapters of 1 Samuel (21–31) chronicle David's flight from place to place in an effort to stay out of Saul's murderous reach. David's life as a fugitive would not end until Saul himself was killed in a battle with the Philistines (31:1-6).

- *To Nob* (21:1-9)—The town of Nob lay only a couple of miles south of Saul's capital. There David requested food and weapons from Ahimelech [uh HIM uh lek], a priest who was in charge of the showbread table formerly housed in the tabernacle. Ahimelech, nervous about helping David, nevertheless gave him used bread from the sacred table and Goliath's sword, which had been kept at Nob for some time. David took the food and sword and then left.

- *To Gath* (21:10-15)—Gath was in enemy territory. It was one of the Philistines' five ruling city-states, probably the principal city in the coalition. Moreover, it was the hometown of none other than the slain giant, Goliath! When some Philistine servants recognized his true identity, David pretended to be insane so that he could escape execution. He quickly left Gath.

- *To a cave at Adullam* [uh DUHL uhm] *and then to Moab* (22:1-4)—Adullam was located near the border between Israelite and Philistine territory. David's family met him there at a cave, and several hundred dissidents also gathered there to rally around David as a growing military force. Still waiting for direction from God, David sought sanctuary for his parents in Moab, where his family had ancestral connections (Ruth 1:1-5; 4:13-17).

- *To the forest of Hereth* [HEE reth] (22:5-23)—Warned by a prophet to return to Judah, David and his men camped in a forest that lay between Bethlehem and Hebron. Meanwhile, Saul was in his capital when he learned that the priests at Nob had assisted David. Saul took vengeance by commissioning an Edomite mercenary to execute the entire priestly family of Ahimelech. The whole city of Nob was destroyed. One of Ahimelech's sons survived, however; this son, Abiathar, took refuge with David and his men.

- *To Keilah* [kih EYE luh] (23:1-12)—Keilah was a city of Judah that lay near the border of Philistine territory. When David heard that the Philistines had attacked the city to steal its stores of new grain, he sought the Lord's guidance. God instructed David to take his men and rescue the city. After the rescue, however, God revealed to David that he and his men could not stay in Keilah lest they be handed over to Saul.

• *To the wildernesses of Ziph and Maon and then to En-gedi (23:13-29)*—David and his men retreated eastward from Keilah into the barren, mountainous wilderness areas southeast of Hebron. A tender moment happened here when David met face-to-face again with his dear friend, Jonathan. The two men renewed their covenant with each other and then parted ways. After Jonathan's departure, some of the local population betrayed David's whereabouts to Saul, so the king closed in for the kill. However, another Philistine incursion into Israel forced Saul to drop his pursuit of David, who moved to the strongholds of En-gedi on the western edge of the Dead Sea.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

PURSUED BY SAUL (1 Sam. 22:6-10)

Saul imagined there was a widespread conspiracy against him that included his son, Jonathan, as well as the people of Benjamin, Saul's own tribe. An Edomite mercenary gave Saul information about David's recent whereabouts.

VERSE 6

Saul heard that David and his men had been discovered. At that time Saul was in Gibeah, sitting under the tamarisk tree at the high place. His spear was in his hand, and all his servants were standing around him.

This verse shows that Israel's monarchy, though developing, was still rudimentary in some ways. Saul had not built a great royal palace; he didn't have a gilded throne room. Instead, the capital was in his hometown of **Gibeah** [GIB ih uh], and he held court **under the tamarisk tree at the high place** ("in Ramah," KJV; "on the height," ESV; "on the hill," NIV). The *tamarisk tree* had been associated with the worship of the Lord since the days of Abraham (see Gen. 21:33). The king's scepter was **his spear**, an indication that Saul served more as a military leader than an administrator. Moreover, **his servants** ("his officials," NIV) stood **around him**, a position that emphasized their readiness to carry out the king's commands.

Like most rulers ancient and modern, Saul made use of informants—people who helped the king either for fear or favor. Consequently, the king received a report in Gibeah that **David and his men had been discovered**. This intelligence report disclosed two significant details. First, it revealed that an informant knew where David was hiding. Second, it revealed that David had gathered a band of fighters around him. In the king's suspicious

mind, David was now organizing a rebellion. The report fed Saul's growing paranoia. The king feared that a conspiracy against him was growing.

VERSE 7

Saul said to his servants, “Listen, men of Benjamin: Is Jesse’s son going to give all of you fields and vineyards? Do you think he’ll make all of you commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds?”

The evil spirit that had come on Saul continued to torment him (19:9). Conspiracy theories and paranoia filled the king's mind. The report on David triggered a half-crazed tirade by Saul against his entire court. He addressed his servants as **men of Benjamin**. That is, these were men from the same tribe as Saul. The king accused them of being part of a conspiracy.

Saul refused to say David's name, referring to his son-in-law instead as **Jesse's son**. David might be a war hero, but he was still the upstart son of an obscure farmer from tiny Bethlehem. In Saul's thinking, David was a treasonous outlaw on the run. The king mocked the foolishness of **his servants** who (in his mind) were anticipating that a ruler from Judah would reward them—men of a different tribe—with property (**fields and vineyards**) and positions of power (**commanders of thousands and ... hundreds**).

VERSE 8

That’s why all of you have conspired against me! Nobody tells me when my own son makes a covenant with Jesse’s son. None of you cares about me or tells me that my son has stirred up my own servant to wait in ambush for me, as is the case today.”

The conspiracy against Saul existed only in the king's tortured mind. Still, the longer David escaped death, the more outrageous Saul's accusations became. Saul now imagined that David might be involved in a coup attempt hatched by Jonathan, his **own son!**

The king had learned—perhaps from an informant—that Jonathan had made **a covenant with Jesse's son**. Was Jonathan the one plotting to assassinate the king? And why had none of Saul's officials informed the king of this pact? In Saul's paranoid mind, his servants didn't tell him because they were involved in the conspiracy. The term rendered **cares about** (“is sorry for,” KJV; “is concerned about,” NIV) literally means “sick of heart.” It carries a connotation of self-pity. Thus, Saul perceived of himself as being alone against the world. The question was not if but when an **ambush** would occur. His most trusted officials surely had agreed to betray their king.

VERSE 9

Then Doeg the Edomite, who was in charge of Saul’s servants, answered: “I saw Jesse’s son come to Ahimelech son of Ahitub at Nob.

A fearful silence must have prevailed for a time after Saul stopped ranting. The spear-wielding king had just accused everyone standing there of conspiring against him. Whoever dared to speak would draw the king’s attention and could easily become the first to receive the king’s rage.

Ironically, the first to speak was not a Benjaminite, or even an Israelite, but rather **Doeg** [DOH ehg] **the Edomite**. His non-Israelite background could mean that Doeg was once a prisoner of war or a mercenary. This same official had been present **at Nob** when the fleeing David stopped there to request food and weapons from the priest **Ahimelech** [uh HIM uh lek] **son of Ahitub** [uh HIGH tuhb] (21:1,7). Doeg’s role on Saul’s staff was described previously as “chief of Saul’s shepherds” (21:7) and here as **in charge of Saul’s servants**. This could reflect either two ways of describing the same role or a change of responsibility that happened after Doeg left Nob. In any case, the Edomite was quick to provide Saul with information that would redirect the king’s rage; he told about David’s recent whereabouts.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Edom” on pages 459-461 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. The Edomites, as descendants of Esau, were distantly related to the Israelites, who were Jacob’s (Israel’s) descendants. Why do you think the Israelites and Edomites were so often at odds? Why would Saul include an Edomite in his council of officers?

VERSE 10

Ahimelech inquired of the LORD for him and gave him provisions. He also gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine.”

Doeg reported to Saul three activities that he had witnessed in Nob. First, he had seen David request divine guidance. **Ahimelech** the priest had **inquired of the LORD**, indicating that David had sought the Lord’s guidance and protection against the king’s efforts to kill him.

Second, Doeg had seen Ahimelech give David **provisions**. The Edomite may not have been aware of how meager the food provision was. It consisted only of a few stale loaves of unleavened bread (21:6). Third, Doeg reported

that David had been given **the sword of Goliath**, which had been kept at Nob until then (21:9).

GUILT BY ASSOCIATION (1 Sam. 22:11-15)

Saul did not question why Doeg only now was revealing such information. Perhaps a late report was better than no report. In any case, the information redirected Saul's anger away from his officers and back onto David. Priests located only two miles from the capital were providing aid and comfort to the king's enemy. That enemy was now armed with a Philistine sword and was gathering fighters around him. Saul rededicated himself to hunt down and kill his son-in-law. First, however, he would deal with the priestly co-conspirators at Nob.

VERSES 11-12

The king sent messengers to summon Ahimelech the priest, son of Ahitub, and his father's whole family, who were priests in Nob. All of them came to the king. Then Saul said, "Listen, son of Ahitub!" "I'm at your service, my lord," he said.

Priests played a pivotal role in Israelite life. At Mount Sinai, the Lord had established the priesthood in conjunction with the giving of the law and the construction of the tabernacle. Aaron (Moses' brother) and his sons were set apart as Israel's first priests—their service being foremost to the Lord (Ex. 40:12-15). By preserving and teaching the law, the priests came before the people on the Lord's behalf. By offering sacrifices and leading worship, the priests came before the Lord on the people's behalf. In essence, priests were both guardians and mediators of Israel's covenant life.

However, Israelite worship and the priesthood were not so clearly practiced during the time of the judges and the early monarchy. Joshua had set up the tent of meeting at Shiloh in order to distribute the tribal lands from there (Josh. 18:1; 19:51). Yet, the ark of the covenant was relocated to Bethel at one point in the time of the judges (Judg. 20:26-28). Then by Samuel's day the ark had been returned to Shiloh, but the priests there were corrupt (1 Sam. 2:12-13, 22-25). The ark was later captured by the Philistines and placed in a Philistine temple (5:1-2). Still later the Philistines returned the ark to Israel, where it was kept at Beth-shemesh until it was mishandled (6:15). Then it was moved to Kiriath-jearim and cared for by an individual who had to be specially consecrated (7:1).

Much of the tabernacle structure may have perished in the destruction of Shiloh. If so, the table of showbread was saved and relocated to Nob, where it was in use when David stopped there for help. Israel's covenant life at this

time was in desperate need of renewal, and Israel's king should have been out front, leading such a revival. Saul, however, was not the spiritual leader Israel needed. He seemed determined to plunge the nation into civil strife, creating rebellion where it did not exist. To that end, Saul **sent messengers to summon Ahimelech the priest, son of Ahitub, and his father's whole family** to appear before the king at Gibeah. The entire priestly family at Nob dutifully obeyed the summons and **came to the king**. If they came under the illusion that the king planned to improve their status—perhaps by moving the ark also to Nob—that hope disappeared the moment Saul spoke.

Saul's opening words ("**Listen, son of Ahitub**") were harsh and formal, not pleasant. The king's voice and demeanor did not bode well for the priests. Saul refused to address the chief priest of Nob by name. Nevertheless, Ahimelech responded to the king with appropriate protocol. The phrase **I'm at your service** indicated that Ahimelech and his brother-priests stood ready to carry out whatever service the king might demand. The phrase **my lord** was an address of respect, deference, and loyalty toward one in authority. In other words, Ahimelech responded that they were loyal servants of the king.

VERSE 13

Saul asked him, "Why did you and Jesse's son conspire against me? You gave him bread and a sword and inquired of God for him, so he could rise up against me and wait in ambush, as is the case today."

In the king's deluded mind, the priests of Nob were traitors, not loyal servants. Saul had summoned Ahimelech and his fellow priests before the throne not to reward them but to prosecute and condemn them. The judge had decided the verdict before hearing the accused. Saul did not ask Ahimelech *if* he had committed treason; he asked, "**Why did you and Jesse's son conspire against me?**" Saul's continuing reference to David as *Jesse's son* was meant to show derision.

Saul then repeated from his informant Doeg's testimony the three actions Ahimelech had taken to help David. All three actions, of course, were factually correct. The priest had indeed given David **bread and a sword and [had] inquired of God for him**. In Saul's thinking, such actions could not be innocent. They could only be evidence that David was plotting a coup (**rise up against**) that included Saul's assassination (**wait in ambush**). Furthermore, the priests of Nob—all of them—were part of the conspiracy. The pronoun "you" in the phrase *why did you and Jesse's son conspire* is plural, indicating that Saul believed all of the priests at Nob were involved in the alleged treason. According to Saul, David's revolt never could have materialized without the priests' support. Thus, they deserved to be condemned along with David.

VERSE 14

Ahimelech replied to the king: “Who among all your servants is as faithful as David? He is the king’s son-in-law, captain of your bodyguard, and honored in your house.

Ahimelech’s defense before Saul consisted of two parts, the first part given in this verse and the second part expressed in verse 15. Interestingly, the first part of Ahimelech’s defense actually was in defense of David. The priest passionately asserted that David was not an enemy of Saul but rather just the opposite. First, Ahimelech described David as the king’s most **faithful** officer. The phrase **all your servants** referred to the king’s entire administration, staff, entourage, bodyguards, and confidants. They were pledged to protect the king and to carry out his policies. None of these *servants*, Ahimelech contended, was truer and more loyal to Saul than David.

Ahimelech then reminded Saul that David was family—David was **the king’s son-in-law**. (Evidently, Ahimelech was unaware that the king had angrily accused his own son, Jonathan, of instigating the coup!) Moreover, David had already been serving as **captain of [the king’s] bodyguard**. This term literally means “one who turns aside those who should obey.” Hence, the title emphasized that David led the troops Saul could trust most. David held a very sensitive post. The mere fact that Saul was alive could be attributed to these soldiers and their loyalty to the king.

Finally, Ahimelech reminded Saul that David was highly respected as a member of the king’s household and administration. The term **honored** conveys the sense that David had earned respect. A person’s reputation was central in this honor. That reputation might come from being in a high social position, from serving well in a position of great responsibility, or from performing heroic feats of courage in battle. All of these criteria were applicable to David. It begged the question of why Saul would accuse David of treason and hunt down to kill such a loyal, respected member of his family.

VERSE 15

Was today the first time I inquired of God for him? Of course not! Please don’t let the king make an accusation against your servant or any of my father’s household, for your servant didn’t have any idea about all this.”

The second part of Ahimelech’s defense focused on the priests’ actions. Ahimelech admitted that he had **inquired of God** for David. Indeed, this wasn’t **the first time** the priest had assisted David in learning God’s will. Ahimelech’s emphatic declaration—**Of course not!**—indicated that the

king, of all people, should know that inquiring of God was not an unusual action for a priest; it certainly wasn't a treasonous action. On the contrary, it was an act of faith by which a priest helped the king or a high-ranking commander in Israel's army discern the Lord's guidance.

Further, Ahimelech avowed his personal loyalty to Saul. Twice in this verse, he referred to himself as Saul's **servant**. The basic meaning of the Hebrew term rendered *servant* is "bond-slave." Here the term denoted the subservient relationship of subjects to their king. Ahimelech affirmed that both he and his **father's household**—that is, all the other priests at Nob—were humbly and faithfully committed to the service of King Saul.

Finally, Ahimelech professed that he knew nothing of a conspiracy to assassinate the king. He wisely did not contradict Saul by saying that no conspiracy existed. Indeed, Ahimelech did not know for certain that the intrigue was not real. He had initially been fearful about David's appearance alone at Nob (21:1). Perhaps the king knew something that the priest did not know. In any case, Ahimelech insisted he was unaware of any coup attempt.

EXPLORE FURTHER

When have you experienced or have known someone who experienced serious but false accusations? How can a believer's faith in God help him or her respond to such false accusations?

DESPERATE MEASURES (1 Sam. 22:16-17)

Saul called for the death of the priests because he perceived them as being loyal to David. When the order was given, the king's servants refused to carry out his command.

VERSE 16

But the king said, "You will die, Ahimelech—you and your father's whole family!"

Not all adversity is the result of a person's own sinful conduct or poor choices. Most of the priests at Nob had no contact with David. They were summoned to appear before the king simply because they were members of Ahimelech's priestly brotherhood. Saul had decided they were guilty by association. Thus, the king pronounced a death sentence against the **whole family** of priests.

Ahimelech was a descendant of Eli, the priest of Shiloh. The execution of the entire family of priests serving at Nob was the grim fulfillment of a

prophecy proclaimed against Eli by an unnamed man of God (see 1 Sam. 2:27-34). Saul cannot be (and was not) thereby justified in slaughtering this family of priests. However, the event demonstrates the grim certainty of divine declarations of judgment.

On the other hand, God's grace also can be seen in the history of this priestly family. Ahimelech's son, Abiathar, would escape Saul's death sentence, would join with David (23:6), and eventually would serve as a priest in David's administration (2 Sam. 20:25). Centuries later, the prophet Jeremiah would be born through Abiathar's line and would faithfully serve the Lord in one of the most critical eras in Israelite history. Moreover, Jeremiah would boldly prophesy the coming of a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34). That new covenant would be fulfilled in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

VERSE 17

Then the king ordered the guards standing by him, “Turn and kill the priests of the LORD because they sided with David. For they knew he was fleeing, but they didn’t tell me.” But the king’s servants would not lift a hand to execute the priests of the LORD.

This verse reveals a second occasion in which foolish orders from Saul were ignored by his subjects (see 1 Sam. 14:44-45). These subjects, however, were **the king's servants**—likely Saul's elite bodyguard detail. For them to refuse to obey a direct order from the king could result in their own deaths.

The soldiers **would not lift a hand to execute the priests of the LORD**. Perhaps the connection of the priests to David also factored into the soldiers' refusal. David was the nation's war hero. He had previously turned to the priests at Nob to inquire of God concerning life-and-death decisions.

Saul's cruelty reached new heights. If *the king's servants* would not carry out his death decree, there was one soldier, Doeg the Edomite, who had no qualms about killing the priests of Nob. In fact, Doeg took Saul's decree to murderous excess (22:18-19). Doeg viciously destroyed the city of Nob, striking down “both men and women, children and infants, oxen, donkeys, and sheep” (22:19). Saul's unchecked ambition had reached a destructive crescendo.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Memorize Psalm 31:7. Most of us will not be threatened with death for serving Jesus Christ. Yet we sometimes may face hostility or false accusations for adhering to Christian values in an increasingly secular culture. How can Psalm 31:7 encourage you as a believer in adversity?

PROTECTED

God guards the honor of His name and the steps of His people.

The day's journey drained me physically and emotionally. Hour after hour of plodding through dense, mountainous terrain had pushed me to the brink of exhaustion. I was the primary radio operator for our infantry company, so I carried over one hundred pounds of equipment on my back. Thick vegetation made travel slow and difficult, but we had to stay alert. The enemy was never far away. We had recently skirmished with enemy troops in several firefights.

On this particular day, the temperature had soared well above one hundred degrees Fahrenheit. I kept thinking the next step would be my last before passing out. Somehow, though, I continued to put one foot in front of the other, pulling my weary body forward. Finally I heard the order to stop. I was about to collapse on the ground when the soldier behind me grabbed my pack with his left hand and held me upright. Simultaneously, his right hand swung a machete, its blade striking the ground where I would have landed. I looked down and saw the writhing remains of a bamboo viper. In my exhaustion, I had missed seeing this very dangerous snake coiled near my feet. The alertness of my comrade kept me from certain harm.

In the journey of life, believers encounter numerous seen and unseen dangers. We can find security in knowing that God orders the steps of His people. He is able to protect them—both *from* the enemy's attacks and *through* any trial or challenge they encounter. In this session we will examine an incident in David's time on the run in which he was tempted to react out of personal vengeance. God used a discerning Israelite woman to keep the future king from acting foolishly.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 SAMUEL 25:1-43

Saul's attitude towards David remained antagonistic. In a cave near En-gedi, David had an opportunity to kill Saul and take the throne of Israel by force.

However, David rejected the opportunity. He still regarded Saul as God's anointed king. David's forbearance resulted in a brief respite from the king's hostility (1 Sam. 24:20-22).

Notably, this brief time of calm between David and Saul was marked also by Samuel's death (25:1). Samuel had anointed both men for the kingship. All Israel mourned the great prophet's passing, for Samuel had led God's people for many years. In his last years, Samuel had guided Israel through the rocky transition from a tribal theocracy to a monarchy.

David and his men migrated to the Wilderness of Paran following Samuel's burial. This territory—dry, rugged, and mostly uninhabited—lay beyond Judah's southern border. The few residents who lived there or grazed animals on either side of the border faced continual threats from Amalekite and Philistine raiding parties. David thus employed his small army—it had grown into a force of at least six hundred fighters (25:13)—to protect local residents in exchange for food and supplies.

David and his men evidently ventured back and forth between the Wilderness of Paran and the hill country of Judah south of Hebron. First Samuel 25 is a dramatic account of David's interaction with a wealthy Israelite couple who had a business in Carmel, just seven miles south of Hebron, but who resided in nearby Maon [MAY ahn]. The husband's name was Nabal [NAY bal]; his wife's name was Abigail.

- *Scene one: Nabal denies a request from David for provisions (25:4-13)*—Nabal's commercial interests included large flocks of sheep and goats. Sheep-shearing time often was accompanied by festive celebrations, with sheep owners providing abundant food and refreshments for their workers. During one such occasion, David sent 10 of his young men to Carmel to request provisions from Nabal. The sheep owner refused David's request, however, and accused the men of being runaway slaves. Consequently, David decided to pay Nabal a personal visit, accompanied by 400 of his armed warriors!

- *Scene two: Abigail is informed of her husband's foolish actions (25:14-17)*—Nabal's shepherds were grateful for the security David and his men had provided. Thus, one of the young men informed Abigail that her husband's hostile, inhospitable behavior was sure to invite trouble for everyone. The shepherds hoped that Abigail would do something to intervene.

- *Scene three: Abigail intercedes with David, saving both her household and the shepherds from death, and preventing David from committing selfish personal revenge (25:18-35)*—Abigail hurried to gather a sizable gift of provisions and set out to find David and his men. When she encountered David, she pleaded with him to show clemency to her foolish husband. Using a variety of appeals, including humble subservience, admission of her husband's foolish nature, affirmation of David's God-secured future as Israel's king, pleas for mercy,

and genuine concern for David's good reputation, Abigail convinced David to stop his plan for personal revenge.

• *Scene four: the Lord strikes down foolish Nabal, and David cares for Abigail by taking her as his wife (25:36-43)*—Abigail did not tell her husband, Nabal, about the events that had transpired until he had sobered up from a drunken feast. When she did tell him, Nabal had a seizure, dying 10 days later. David heard of Nabal's death, praised the Lord for keeping him (David) from acting out of personal revenge, and then sent messengers to Abigail, offering to care for her as his wife.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

DISASTER FORESEEN (1 Sam. 25:14-17)

Abigail, Nabal's wife, was informed of her husband's refusal to assist David. She knew that she needed to take a course of action that would avert a great disaster. She decided to meet David and try to intercede.

VERSE 14

One of Nabal's young men informed Abigail, Nabal's wife: "Look, David sent messengers from the wilderness to greet our master, but he yelled at them."

The phrase **young men** ("servants," NIV) here refers to Nabal's sheep shearers. The sense of urgency in the narrative suggests that the dispatched messenger was one of the younger, faster workers. Perhaps this was not the first time a worker had needed to inform **Abigail** about her husband's appalling actions. Whether this messenger acted on his own initiative or was sent by the older workers is unclear. Regardless, the young man provided Abigail with an accurate account of events that had transpired.

The young man's report emphasized two themes. First, Nabal's arrogant attitude endangered him and everyone connected with him. Second, the helpful protection that David and his men had provided seemed to justify their taking retribution against an ingrate such as Nabal.

The young worker used contrasting verbs to denote the respective actions of David and Nabal. David had **sent messengers ... to greet** ("to salute," KJV) Nabal. The Hebrew word rendered *to greet* means "to bless"—that is, to display a desire for positive benefits to accrue to the individual being addressed. In contrast, Nabal **yelled** ("railed," KJV, ESV; "hurled insults," NIV) at David's messengers, and by extension at David. The Hebrew verb

translated *yelled* occurs only here in the Old Testament. The idea was that Nabal's reply in both tenor and content was the opposite of David's greeting.

VERSE 15

The men treated us well. When we were in the field, we weren't harassed and nothing of ours was missing the whole time we were living among them.

Nabal's servant described the good conduct of David's soldiers toward the sheep shearers. The shepherds had been keenly aware of the armed men roving the same region where their flocks grazed. David may even have sent detachments routinely to guard the shepherds **in the field** and in their camp. Throughout the various encounters, none of Nabal's servants had ever been **harassed** by David's men. Neither did David's men ever steal any of the shepherds' food or possessions. Nabal's workers felt completely at ease for as long as they **were living among** David and his men.

VERSE 16

They were a wall around us, both day and night, the entire time we were herding the sheep.

Nabal grazed his flocks in the wilderness regions of southern Judah. This frontier area was inadequately guarded by Saul's army and within striking distance of both Amalekite and Philistine raiding parties. The inhospitable terrain also attracted various domestic fugitives and renegades. Bandit gangs routinely preyed on vulnerable shepherds who dared to bring their sheep into the area.

David's men protected Nabal's shepherds from all such marauders. The young servant described their protectors as **a wall**. Many ancient cities were encircled by tall, thick stone walls with gate entrances that could be shut and barred in times of threat. Walls were the principal method of defense for any settled community. Hence, the description was a high compliment to David's troops. With their protectors nearby, the shepherds felt safe **both day and night**. At no point when the shepherds were **herding** ("keeping," KJV, ESV) **the sheep** were they afraid, because David's men fully protected them.

VERSE 17

Now consider carefully what you must do, because there is certain to be trouble for our master and his entire family. He is such a worthless fool nobody can talk to him!"

The young man now clarified that his purpose in coming to Abigail was not simply to tattle on her husband but to elicit her help. The shepherds desperately needed her to intervene—and not just for their sake. The young messenger boldly reminded Abigail that their **master** and her husband was **a worthless fool** (“a son of Belial,” KJV; “a wicked man,” NIV). No one could reason with him. In David’s time, the expression rendered *a worthless fool* described an individual whose behavior produced his or her own ruin. Thus, the shepherds clearly anticipated that David would move quickly and forcefully to punish Nabal **and his entire family**.

The statement **there is certain to be trouble** (“evil is determined against,” KJV; “disaster is hanging over,” NIV) left no doubt as to the shepherds’ anticipation of David’s response to Nabal’s insult. The verb rendered *there is certain to be* appears in a form that denotes completed action—action so sure that it could be described as having already occurred. The Hebrew word rendered *trouble* covered a broad spectrum of harm, from physical injury to an extended period of distress. Nabal’s workers did not know the exact action David would take, but they were convinced the action would be disastrous for Nabal, his family, and his workers.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Fool, Foolishness, and Folly” on pages 590-591 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What kinds of folly do Nabal and Saul represent? How can their examples help us avoid acting unwisely?

DAVID RELENTS (1 Sam. 25:32-35)

Abigail responded to the young man’s plea for help by quickly gathering a substantial gift of food and supplies to try to appease David (25:18-31). She and her servants encountered David and his warriors on the road coming toward them. Abigail humbly bowed before David and pleaded with him not to carry out his planned revenge, arguing that such a course of action would tarnish David’s good conscience and character.

VERSES 32-33

Then David said to Abigail, “Praise to the LORD God of Israel, who sent you to meet me today! Your discernment is blessed, and you are blessed. Today you kept me from participating in bloodshed and avenging myself by my own hand.

From a cultural perspective, Abigail's decision to meet with and appease David would have been considered scandalous. Her plan was undertaken without her husband's knowledge. She was meeting with her husband's enemy in a deliberate effort to act contrary to her husband's known wishes. In the process, she spoke in a disparaging—albeit truthful—way about her husband. She admitted that he lived up to his name—Nabal in Hebrew means “fool.”

Conversely, from the Lord's perspective, Abigail's actions were wise and shrewd. She acted humbly, paying proper homage to David and taking guilt upon herself (25:23-24). She acknowledged that David fought the Lord's battles and would one day become the king of Israel (25:28,30). She recognized the Lord's involvement in both David's and her actions (25:26,29-31). Finally, she showed a genuine desire to prevent David from sinning by bringing bloodguilt upon himself (25:26,30-31).

David was deeply impressed by Abigail's faith and wisdom. His entire demeanor changed; gratitude replaced the craving for revenge. His first words of response were **praise to** (“blessed be,” KJV, ESV) **the LORD God of Israel**. David agreed that Abigail's mission had been providential. Israel's covenant God had intervened to protect Abigail and her household from danger and to keep the Lord's anointed servant on course to become Israel's righteous ruler. The Lord had selected David to become Israel's next king. That calling took precedence over all other roles in David's life.

David affirmed that God had **sent** Abigail to meet him. The Sovereign Lord was working in the lives of both Abigail and David to accomplish His purposes. God not only dispatched Abigail but also governed the timing of her trip. The word **today** suggests that she met David at the precise time God selected, the moment best suited for altering David's intentions.

David further praised the Lord for Abigail's **discernment** (“advice,” KJV; “discretion,” ESV; “good judgment,” NIV) and for the woman herself (**you are blessed**). The Hebrew word twice rendered *blessed* in verse 33 is the same term translated *praise to* in verse 32. The beatitude in verse 32 praised God for who He is; the two beatitudes in verse 33 thanked God for what He had done through Abigail. In essence, the three beatitudes convey a single idea. David praised the Lord for endowing Abigail with the wisdom to intervene in his proposed revenge; thus, the Lord would surely bless Abigail in the future.

The phrase **participating in bloodshed** literally means “coming into bloods.” In Hebrew thought, life was linked directly to blood (see Lev. 17:11). To shed someone's blood was to terminate the person's life. The plural form “bloods” was used as an idiom to refer to homicide. Hence, David rejoiced that Abigail had kept him from unjustly killing innocent people. His planned retaliation exceeded his legal prerogative. He would have been acting out of selfish anger (**avenging myself by my own hand**) rather than for a just cause.

Thankfully, God still intervenes in our lives as His people to guide us in His ways. He may work through a godly family member or a Christian friend. He may work through a wise pastor, teacher, counselor, or law enforcement officer. In whatever way the Lord works to “deliver us from the evil one” (Matt. 6:13), He is surely worthy of our highest praise and gratitude.

VERSE 34

Otherwise, as surely as the LORD God of Israel lives, who prevented me from harming you, if you had not come quickly to meet me, Nabal wouldn't have had any men left by morning light.”

David confirmed that he and his army were indeed on the march to take revenge on Nabal. If **the LORD God of Israel** had not intervened through Abigail, David planned to strike that same day and to leave alive none of Nabal's men. Further, David's vengeance would have extended to Nabal and his family. David acknowledged that the Lord's staying hand had **prevented** [him] **from harming** Abigail. This revelation underscored the timeliness of her actions.

David's oath contrasted Israel's God with the idols of Israel's neighbors. Idols cannot move. They cannot speak or hear. They cannot act in response to a given situation. On the other hand, *the LORD God* moves without assistance. He speaks and listens to His people. He works in every situation to guard the honor of His name and to order the steps of His people.

VERSE 35

Then David accepted what she had brought him and said, “Go home in peace. See, I have heard what you said and have granted your request.”

The quantity of food Abigail brought as a gift was hardly sufficient to sustain David's troops for any length of time. It served, however, as a token payment regarding Nabal's debt. After all, David had never demanded from Nabal any more than “whatever [he could] afford” (25:8). Thus, **David accepted what** [Abigail] **had brought him**. He understood the gift also as a demonstration of Abigail's loyalty to him. David then sent her **home in peace**, assuring Abigail that he had **heard** (“hearkened to,” KJV; “obeyed,” ESV) and **granted** her plea for mercy.

The Hebrew word rendered *peace* involves much more than the absence of strife. The basic meaning of the term is “to be whole or intact.” Healthy relationships and prosperity are implicit in the idea as well. The source of true peace—whether in David's day or today—is God.

The phrase **what you said** referred to Abigail's admission of her husband's foolishness, her prediction of David's kingship, and her comprehension of God's role in the present and future. Abigail's request denoted her plea for David to forgive her husband for his unjust actions. Hence, David treated Abigail with respect and treated Nabal with mercy.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Memorize 1 Samuel 25:32-33. Then think of a situation in which someone's timely intervention prevented you from doing something wrong. How did you react to that individual? What might hinder you from taking steps to help someone avoid wrongdoing?

GOD INTERVENES (1 Sam. 25:36-38)

Nabal appears to have been ignorant of the imminent danger in which he had put himself, his family, and his workers. Even as Abigail acted quickly to avert a massacre, Nabal feasted and got drunk. Abigail determined, however, that she would inform her husband about the day's events as soon as he was sober. He needed to realize the fallout of his foolish actions.

VERSE 36

Then Abigail went to Nabal, and there he was in his house, holding a feast fit for a king. Nabal was in a good mood and very drunk, so she didn't say anything to him until morning light.

Abigail arrived home to find **Nabal ... in his house, holding a feast fit for a king**. Nabal's behavior to this point in the narrative revealed him to be self-absorbed, ungrateful, and foolish. The phrase *holding a feast fit for a king* invites the reader to compare Nabal to Saul. First, both Nabal and Saul were wealthy and powerful men. Nabal's influence was regional rather than national, but it was sufficient to give him a false sense of security.

Second, both Nabal and Saul benefited from David's presence. David's military force permitted Nabal's shepherds to care for the flocks without raiders stealing any sheep or goats, thus increasing Nabal's profits. Similarly, the presence of David's army in the region secured Saul's southern border without increasing the cost to the royal treasury.

Third, both Nabal and Saul had female family members who became David's wives. At the time of this incident, David was married to Saul's daughter Michal. In time, David also would marry Nabal's widow, Abigail.

In both cases the marriages contributed to David's rise to power. His marriage to Michal brought him into the royal family and cemented his already popular reputation. David's marriage to Abigail gave him significant financial resources to support his cause.

Fourth, both Nabal and Saul foolishly focused more on material matters than on spiritual concerns. When the prophet Samuel instructed Saul to completely destroy everything that belonged to the Amalekites, Saul did not kill the Amalekite king or the best of the Amalekite sheep and cattle (1 Sam. 15:9). When Nabal received David's request for payment of services, he refused to fulfill the demands of the law (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:15). Instead Nabal viewed the request as an insult and a potential loss of personal assets (1 Sam. 25:11).

Finally, both Nabal and Saul would die as a result of divine judgment. Saul and his sons would soon die in a battle against the Philistines (31:1-6). Their deaths would fulfill a judgment prophesied by Samuel against Saul's kingship (15:26-29; 28:16-19). Nabal's death at the Lord's hand would come even sooner than Saul's.

Nabal celebrated the completion of sheep-shearing time with an extravagant feast, during which he became highly intoxicated. He failed to recognize how close to dying he was on that day. He was totally unaware that his wife had acted contrary to his wishes. Moreover, he did not consider that his violation of a biblical command against drunkenness was a serious problem for him. Consequently, that evening he **was in a good mood** ("heart was merry," ESV; "in high spirits," NIV).

Abigail realized the futility of addressing her husband in his drunken state. Therefore she said nothing to him concerning her day's adventure. Instead, she waited **until morning light** ("until daybreak," NIV). Throughout history numerous remedies have been proposed for counteracting the stupefying effects of alcohol. I once served on a state attorney general's task force on alcohol and drug abuse. During our preparation for the work, one trainer told us: "Coffee only makes for a wide-awake drunk, and a cold shower makes for a wet drunk. The only cure for inebriation is time." When the sun rose the next morning for Nabal, enough time had elapsed for him to regain his senses.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Drunkenness" on page 444 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Why does Scripture issue strong warnings against drunkenness? How might Nabal have benefited if he had heeded those warnings available to him?

VERSE 37

In the morning when Nabal sobered up, his wife told him about these events. Then he had a seizure and became paralyzed.

With Nabal now sober, Abigail recounted all that she had done on the previous day. Nabal's reaction leaves no doubt that she was comprehensive and explicit about every detail, especially concerning what David had intended to do in retaliation. A literal translation of the words **he had a seizure and became paralyzed** reads: "his heart died within him, and he became like a stone."

Since Nabal survived for a few days after the seizure, his heart did not stop completely. In Hebrew thought, the heart was considered to be the seat of the human will. When an individual made a deliberate, life-impacting choice, the cardiovascular system was impacted. The heart rate increased and the blood pressure rose. To say that Nabal's heart "died" meant in this context that he was no longer able to act or even decide to act. Thus, the seizure likely was a severe stroke that left Nabal paralyzed.

VERSE 38

About 10 days later, the LORD struck Nabal dead.

The biblical writer was careful to attribute Nabal's death **10 days later to the LORD**. Moreover, the repetition of Nabal's name throughout this chapter serves as a constant reminder that the man was foolish. One characteristic of the fool in Scripture was behavior that ignored the reality of God. Nabal had been "harsh and evil" in his business practices (1 Sam. 25:3). The individual who acquires riches unjustly will discover that such wealth in the end is destructive (Prov. 11:28; 28:6). Only a fool ignores the divine consequences of such behavior.

Nabal's death left Abigail without a husband to care for her. In a patriarchal society such as that in ancient Israel, a widow's life could become difficult. David thus took on Abigail's future care by offering to marry her—a proposal that she accepted (1 Sam. 25:39-42). Ironically, a foolish man who had greedily refused to offer even basic hospitality now had lost his entire family and possessions to Israel's future king. God had acted once more to guard the honor of His name and the steps of His people.

EXPLORE FURTHER

How have you seen God guard the honor of His name? How have you, as a believer, seen the Lord order your steps to bring honor to His name?

RESPECT

God is ultimately in charge of those who lead.

An architect's role, simply stated, is to develop plans by which an idea from a creative mind can become an actual physical structure. The plans are recorded in blueprints and other documents. Blueprints cover the broad spectrum of design specifics—from room dimensions to construction details. Other documents include such details as the brand and model numbers of products to be used in the building as well as paint types and colors for various walls. Still other documents provide models and pictures to help the builder visualize the results.

Architectural plans are critical to a builder because they determine the final layout and appearance of the building. They cover a multitude of items that are never seen by most observers yet are just as critical as the building's external appearance. For example, the plans diagram a structural scheme for the building. If this component is inadequate or misread by the builder, the building might collapse. Numerous pipes and wires are hidden within the building's walls, floors, and ceilings. Installed incorrectly, the plumbing and fixtures (such as fire alarms) will not function.

God is the Sovereign Architect of His creation. That means He is the ultimate Architect of human history and, thus, of our everyday lives. God's plans for His people, when followed, result in sturdy, useful lives in His service. As God works in us, opportunities present themselves. These opportunities must be weighed in light of God's principles and design given in the Holy Scriptures.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 SAMUEL 24:1-22; 26:1-25

Judah's rugged southern wilderness provided a safe haven from Saul for David and his men. Nevertheless, Saul occasionally would receive specific information about David's whereabouts and would lead his troops into the region to kill David. One such foray centered around En-ge-di, an oasis on the

western shore of the Dead Sea (24:1-4). Saul took 3,000 of his elite soldiers for the mission, a force five times the size of David's command. Faced with such overwhelming odds, David and his men took refuge in nearby caves. At one point Saul entered a cave to relieve himself, unaware that David and some of his men were concealed in the dark recesses of that same cave. David's men urged their leader to assassinate Saul then and there, but David refused; instead, he secretly cut off a corner of Saul's royal robe.

After Saul left the cave and got some distance away, David regretted that he had committed even that harmless but humiliating symbolic gesture. He called to Saul, admitted what he had done, and promised that he would never lift his hand against the king, since Saul was still the Lord's anointed ruler (24:5-15). Saul was moved by David's show of loyalty. He admitted that one day David would be established as Israel's king. Saul and his troops then returned home, leaving David and his men unharmed (24:16-22).

Saul's clemency did not last long. Informed again of David's whereabouts, Saul once more led his force of elite warriors into the wilderness in pursuit of David (26:1-4). David decided to sneak into Saul's camp at night while the king and his men were sleeping. As before, however, David refused to lift a hand against the Lord's anointed king. Instead, he took Saul's spear and water jug to send a message that he was not the king's enemy (26:5-12).

Having retreated to a safe distance, David called out to awaken the sleeping king and his troops. He chided Saul's troops for not protecting their king; then he pleaded with Saul directly to give up the vendetta and recognize his loyalty. David accepted the possibility that he might be at fault for some sin he had committed. He was more than willing to repent if this were true. David then suggested that resentful people might be the source of his problem. Their wrongful accusations had forced him into hiding and now threatened to force him into exile among pagans (26:13-20).

Once again Saul admitted that he had been wrong about David. He invited David to return to the king's residence. (David chose to remain in exile.) David then returned the king's personal equipment, a way of saying that he refused to usurp the throne. Instead he trusted his life to God's protection and his future to God's timing (26:21-25).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS (1 Sam. 26:7-8)

David had more than one opportunity to take Saul's life and the kingship of Israel. David's men wrongly concluded that the Lord was working behind the

scenes to orchestrate the situations. They urged David to take advantage of these opportunities to strike down his enemy, but David would not do so.

VERSE 7

That night, David and Abishai came to the troops, and Saul was lying there asleep in the inner circle of the camp with his spear stuck in the ground by his head. Abner and the troops were lying around him.

Saul led his troops into the wilderness area of Judah in a renewed effort to kill David (26:1-6). A patrol from David's men shadowed the royal army. When Saul's troops stopped to set up camp for the night, the patrol sent word to David, who then joined his men to appraise the situation. David recruited a volunteer to go with him into Saul's camp later **that night**.

From a military perspective, Saul had located his campsite well. It was situated on a hillside (26:3), providing a strategic view and a defensive advantage. Further, the king enjoyed maximum protection—or so he thought—by sleeping in the center of the camp, in an **inner circle** of his warriors. **His spear** [was] **stuck in the ground by his head** so that Saul could reach it quickly if needed. Finally, a trusted relative commanded Saul's troops. **Abner and the troops** bedded down in a circle around the king. Any enemy would have to fight through them to get to Saul.

The volunteer for David's covert mission was **Abishai** [uh BIGH shigh], David's nephew (see 1 Chron. 2:13-16). In time, Abishai would become one of David's most loyal generals and win fame for killing 18,000 Edomites (1 Chron. 18:12). Abishai and David slipped unnoticed into Saul's camp while the king and his soldiers were **lying there asleep**.

VERSE 8

Then Abishai said to David, “Today God has handed your enemy over to you. Let me thrust the spear through him into the ground just once. I won’t have to strike him twice!”

Sincere people who love God and seek to serve Him can nevertheless misinterpret the Lord's expectations at times. **Abishai** interpreted his and David's successful infiltration of Saul's camp as a divinely given opportunity to slay the king. He whispered into David's ear, **“God has handed your enemy over to you.”** Abishai categorized the king as David's *enemy*; David still considered Saul to be “the LORD's anointed” (24:6; 26:9).

Having reached a faulty conclusion that assassinating Saul was God's will, Abishai volunteered to perform the bloody deed. He assured David that he

could dispatch the king with a single thrust of his spear. Abishai's motivation for volunteering to kill Saul is not stated in the biblical text. Abishai might have thought that his doing the deed rather than David would give David judicial cover before the Israelite people. On the other hand, Abishai could have simply thought he would secure fame and reward for the deed. In any case, he recognized that the situation offered an opportunity for David to get rid of a rival and assume the kingship sooner rather than later. Abishai failed to grasp the appropriate action to take in that opportunity.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Providence" on pages 1340-1342 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Why do you think Abishai concluded God had providentially given David an opportunity to kill Saul? How can believers today know for sure whether or not God is providentially involved in orchestrating advancement opportunities they have?

GODLY RESPECT (1 Sam. 26:9-12)

David recognized that Abishai's interpretation of the situation was erroneous. In both his analysis of the situation and his actions, David's reverence for God and for God's law guided him.

VERSE 9

But David said to Abishai, "Don't destroy him, for who can lift a hand against the LORD's anointed and be blameless?"

David continued to identify Saul as **the LORD's anointed**. In Israelite culture, the act of anointing implied that God's power was being poured out on an individual to carry out the duties of high office. To date only two men had been anointed to be kings of Israel, Saul and David. The prophet Samuel had anointed both men in separate, private ceremonies (10:1; 16:11-13). Neither man immediately took office by virtue of the rite. Samuel later proclaimed Saul as king in a national assembly (10:17-25). In David's case, neither a national assembly nor a military crisis had yet propelled him into office.

David recognized that only God had the authority to remove Saul, and God had not yet done so. Therefore, neither David nor Abishai could **lift a hand against** Saul and **be blameless** ("guiltless," KJV). If either man killed the one whom God had appointed to be king, then the killer would be guilty of violating God's law and thus would incur God's wrath.

VERSE 10

David added, “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.

David resolved to leave Saul’s fate in God’s hands. His confidence that Saul soon would die was expressed in the statement **the LORD will certainly strike him down**. Perhaps the recent experience with Nabal and Abigail fortified David’s conclusion on this occasion (compare 25:25-27,37-38). David underscored his conclusion with the solemn oath **as the LORD lives**. This powerful oath reflected the conviction that Israel’s covenant God was uniquely the living God.

David shed light on his assertion by posing two potential outcomes. First, Saul might die a natural death. The phrase **his day will come** denotes the biblical conviction that God knows and controls every person’s lifespan—its beginning and its end (Ps. 139:16; Heb. 9:27). David’s perspective focused on God’s role in deciding when Saul’s life would end. David would therefore leave the timing of Saul’s death to the Lord. The phrase **and he will die** simply emphasized that when God determined the time for a person to die, death then was inescapable.

David also presented a second possible outcome. Saul might **go into battle and perish**. Battles in the ancient world were bloody affairs in which both soldiers and kings were killed in combat. Israel’s ongoing struggles with the Philistines had continued for years. It was only a matter of time before the Philistines would attack Israel again. Death on the battlefield was a distinct possibility. Moreover, God would still be the One who decreed the timing.

VERSE 11

However, because of the LORD, I will never lift my hand against the LORD’s anointed. Instead, take the spear and the water jug by his head, and let’s go.”

The phrase **because of the LORD** signaled that David was keenly aware of the Lord’s presence with him. Likewise, it implied that David revered the Lord as holy and knew that ultimately he—like Saul—would stand accountable before the Lord for his choices and actions. Equally significant to David was the knowledge that God had chosen Saul (**the LORD’s anointed**) as king over Israel. This respectful conviction forged David’s attitude and behavior. An appropriate fear of the Lord prevented David from taking Saul’s life.

On the other hand, David had an important point to make to Saul, to the king’s “choice men” (1 Sam. 26:2), and perhaps even to Abishai. Thus, David

instructed Abishai to grab **the spear and the water jug** lying beside the slumbering king's head. By confiscating these items, David symbolically held in his hands Saul's authority as ruler and, indeed, Saul's very life.

VERSE 12

So David took the spear and the water jug by Saul's head, and they went their way. No one saw them, no one knew, and no one woke up; they all remained asleep because a deep sleep from the LORD came over them.

David and Abishai had slipped silently into the center of a hostile encampment. They had hovered over the sleeping ruler. Only David's integrity kept Abishai from driving a spear into the king's heart. The two warriors had confiscated **the spear and the water jug by Saul's head**. Now the pair had to escape from the camp without being detected. If Saul's soldiers awoke to find the two intruders in their midst, David and Abishai could have been captured and killed. However, the biblical writer clearly attributed the pair's successful mission to God's providence, not to human skill or stealth. In effect, God had put Saul's entire army into **a deep sleep**.

David's life was not all that was at stake. God had said that David would become Israel's king. If David died before that promise was fulfilled, it would call into question all of God's promises. Further, God had told Samuel that the new king would be chosen according to his heart, not according to physical attributes (16:7). In Hebrew thought, the heart represented the seat of decision making. David's actions that night substantiated God's choice of David to become Israel's king. David made godly choices. God's intervention was nothing less than God's accomplishing His word (see Isa. 55:10-11).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Memorize 1 Samuel 26:9. What would you say are some real-life applications of this verse in our modern world? In the church?

REMORSE (1 Sam. 26:21)

Once David reached a secure location, he called to Saul and his men, charging Saul's commander in particular with being negligent in protecting the king (26:13-20). After discovering that David had another opportunity to kill him but chose not to do so, Saul expressed remorse over the way he had treated David. Saul declared that he would no longer seek to harm David.

VERSE 21

Saul responded, “I have sinned. Come back, my son David, I will never harm you again because today you considered my life precious. I have been a fool! I’ve committed a grave error.”

Now fully awake, Saul recognized David’s voice. Thus, the exchange shifted to a dialogue between Saul and David (26:17-20). David entreated Saul to divulge the reason that the king hunted him. If Saul’s charges against him were valid, then David would be ready and willing to admit the wrongdoing and to repent. However, if mischievous people had stirred up the king against David, then David pleaded for Saul to cease the vendetta.

It is significant that David framed his entreaty to Saul in the context of his relationship to the Lord. If David had committed some unknown sin against Saul, it would be an even greater offense against God. Thus, David would need to rectify his relationship with the Lord in order to correct his relationship with Saul. On the other hand, if David was innocent, then he was being denied his rightful place to worship the Lord. Saul’s continuing persecution could force David to reside in a land where the local population worshiped false gods.

Having heard David’s plea, Saul confessed that he, not David, had sinned. The Hebrew word rendered **I have sinned** means “to miss the mark.” The term depicts an arrow having been shot at a target only to fall woefully short. In spiritual terms, the word speaks of falling short of the goal God has established for one’s life. It also can denote a failure to uphold civil law or coming up short in respecting the well-being of another person. Thus, Saul confessed that he had woefully missed the mark of God’s expectations by persecuting David. As subsequent events would show, however, Saul evidently stopped short of genuine repentance. His sorrow was short-lived.

Saul invited David to **come back**—that is, to return to the king’s court. He promised never to harm David, claiming that he had learned a valuable lesson through this episode. Saul’s invitation called for David to evaluate the dependability of Saul’s words. Could he truly trust Saul to keep his promises in the future? David would decide that he could not trust Saul.

King Saul even acknowledged in front of his troops that he had **been a fool** (“played the fool,” KJV; “acted foolishly,” ESV). The Hebrew term rendered *fool* typically denotes someone with a lack of moral or spiritual sense. It is a strong word that indicates an utter lack of comprehension. The verb form of this word often occurs in contexts where an individual acts out of fear and thus behaves without thinking. In the past, Saul had repeatedly exhibited an unwillingness to trust God. In the next crisis he confronted, the king again demonstrated his foolishness. He delved into the occult when he should have

trusted in God (28:3-8). Human remorse alone cannot produce genuine life transformation. True repentance is an about-face from rebellion to faith.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Repentance” on pages 1375-1376 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Then read 2 Corinthians 7:9-10. How does Paul describe genuine repentance in this passage? In what ways can an unbeliever express genuine repentance? For what reasons might a believer need to repent?

TRUST IN GOD (1 Sam. 26:22-25)

David returned the king’s spear to Saul and called upon God to be the Judge between the present and future kings. David emphatically denied any evil intention against Saul. Saul then blessed David, and the two men went their separate ways.

VERSE 22

David answered, “Here is the king’s spear; have one of the young men come over and get it.

Saul had proven on a number of occasions that his word was not trustworthy. Therefore, David wisely kept a safe distance from the unpredictable king. He requested that Saul send **one of [his] young men** to retrieve **the king’s spear**. David had not taken the items for personal profit; rather, he had taken them to demonstrate his loyalty to Saul. The water jug was a personal item that evidently had no public significance. On the other hand, Saul used *the king’s spear* like a scepter. Hence, it represented his position and authority as Israel’s king. By returning the spear, David publicly denied having any intention of usurping the throne. David was content to wait until God elevated him to the kingship.

VERSE 23

May the LORD 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.

Having made arrangements to return Saul’s spear, David then responded to Saul’s statement of remorse (26:21). He neither affirmed nor rejected what

Saul had said. He did not seek any restitution from Saul. Rather, David called on the Lord to evaluate both Saul and himself. The Hebrew verb rendered **repay** literally means “to cause to return to.” It makes a strong connection between behavior and judgment. Human intellect can only evaluate deeds, but God examines the motivation—the heart—as well.

The word **righteousness** denotes behavior that is “right” in the sense of being consistent with a covenant relationship. Here the context suggests at least the relationship of a king with his subject. However, David may also have meant a *righteousness* involving conformity to the terms of Israel’s covenant with God. The term **loyalty** (“faithfulness,” KJV) refers to the characteristic of fidelity. Within the Old Testament, the term frequently refers to God as an expression of His complete dependability. People cannot measure *righteousness* or *loyalty* accurately because they cannot know an individual’s heart. Only God can rightly appraise the human heart without mistake.

David added two undeniable facts. First, he could have easily assassinated Saul as the king lay sleeping. Second, David attributed to divine providence his ability to enter and depart Saul’s camp without being detected. These two facts—if Saul would think rationally about them—provided strong evidence of David’s loyalty, both to the king and to Israel’s God.

VERSE 24

Just as I considered your life valuable today, so may the LORD consider my life valuable and rescue me from all trouble.”

David continued to express his dependence on and devotion to **the LORD**, using some of Saul’s own thoughts. The king had previously described David’s refusal to take his life with the words “you considered my life precious” (26:21). David alluded to this appraisal, using slightly different language. Furthermore, David introduced his paraphrase with the words **just as** (“as surely as,” NIV). These variations raise the expectation that David wanted Saul also to consider his life valuable.

However, David made no direct reference here to the king. Instead, he asked God to consider his **life valuable**. He called upon the Lord to **rescue** [him] **from all trouble**. The Hebrew verb translated *rescue* commonly describes personal deliverance. Such deliverance might be physical rescue, but it also has spiritual overtones. *Rescue* involves being kept separate from danger. The term *trouble* denotes intense inner turmoil. It describes dire distress, such as during a city’s siege by an enemy army or the pain of a woman giving birth. David’s use of this vivid terminology was comprehensive. If God could deliver David from the most intense difficulty—which He had done many times before now—God surely could rescue David from lesser problems.

VERSE 25

Saul said to him, “You are blessed, my son David. You will certainly do great things and will also prevail.” Then David went on his way, and Saul returned home.

The Hebrew language contains two words that are translated **blessed** in English Bibles. One word refers to something good that ultimately is attributable to God yet also is the result of human choices. The second term refers to something that God does independent of human activity or feeling. This term has the sense of that which God confers on His people for success in carrying out a divine assignment. In 1 Samuel 26:25, the biblical writer used the second Hebrew word for *blessed*. In other words, Saul was making a tacit admission that David’s blessedness was from God’s hand. God had chosen David to be king, and He was with David in all circumstances. David would **certainly do great things and** [would] **prevail** (“succeed,” ESV; “surely triumph,” NIV). Thus, Saul could do nothing to prevent David from becoming king, because God had planned it.

Saul **returned** to his capital at Gibeah. David did not accept Saul’s invitation to return to the king’s court. He simply did not trust Saul. Instead, David went into exile in the territory controlled by the Philistines (27:1). The two men would never see or speak to each other again. The Philistines would soon renew their efforts to destroy Israel. The Philistine invasion would set in motion a series of events that terminated Saul’s dynasty. At the same time, the way was opened for the establishment of David’s kingship.

In the coming decades, David would experience much adversity and trouble. Yet he would forge Israel into a regional power and expand the nation’s borders to the boundaries God had promised (see Gen. 15:18-21). In time God would promise to establish the throne of David forever (2 Sam. 7:11b-16). This promise was fulfilled ultimately in Jesus Christ. When the Roman governor Pilate affixed an inscription reading “the King of the Jews” on Jesus’ cross, he unwittingly recognized Jesus as the heir to David’s throne. God’s promise of an eternal kingdom remains uninterrupted today. Jesus Christ is now and forever the King of kings and Lord of lords!

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Saul” on pages 1448-1450 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. In what ways was Saul a tragic figure in Israel? How was he an example of a foolish man? What are some spiritual lessons you have gleaned from the accounts of Saul and David’s conflict?

VICTORY

Only God supplies a true and lasting victory.

“World Series!” “Super Bowl!” “March Madness!” Hordes of sports fans anticipate these annual championship events. Even many non-sports-minded individuals get caught up in the excitement that these events generate, especially the events that focus on team competition. In team sports, every player contributes in some way to a championship run.

Here is a short quiz about championships in team sports for you to take:

1. What college team officially won the 1917 national college football championship?
2. What professional football team won Super Bowl IV, a game played on January 11, 1970?
3. What professional baseball team won the 1995 World Series?
4. What school in 2014 won both the women’s and men’s NCAA Division I basketball championships? (See the end of this section for answers.)

Here is the main point behind giving this quiz: An annual championship in a sports competition lasts only until the next season when the competition begins again. Last year’s teams—even the championship teams—lose some players and add new players. Last year’s victories do not guarantee victories in the new season. Championships have to be fought for and won again and again. As time passes, even championship victories fade into history and have a decreasing impact on most fans’ daily lives.

In contrast, certain events can have a far more lasting impact on us. For example, you likely recall the names of your most influential teachers in school. You may remember where you were and what you were doing when a national catastrophe happened, as well as how the event impacted your everyday life then and continues to do so today.

Finally, some events even have eternal consequences. Salvation in Christ is such an event. If you have been saved through faith in Jesus, your eternal destiny is secure. In the contest between good and evil, God is eternally victorious. He can be trusted to give direction to our lives as believers.

(Quiz answers: 1–Georgia Tech; 2–Kansas City Chiefs; 3–Atlanta Braves; 4–University of Connecticut)

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 SAMUEL 27:1–31:13

Saul had issued words of remorse and an invitation for his son-in-law to return to the king's house (1 Sam. 26:21). David concluded, however, that the king's disposition had not truly changed. In time Saul would resume his efforts to kill David. Therefore, David sought refuge in a most unlikely region, the territory controlled by the Philistines (27:1). David and his warriors hired out as mercenaries for Achish [AY kish], the ruler of Gath. The Philistine monarch awarded the city of Ziklag to David as a base for his troops and their families. The town's location about twenty-five miles southwest of Gath afforded David a degree of independence in military operations. In the guise of a Philistine soldier of fortune, David attacked Israel's other enemies along Judah's southern frontier (27:2-12).

Meanwhile, the Philistine rulers combined their armies and prepared to invade Israel. This clear and present crisis terrified Saul, driving him to inquire of the Lord. When the Lord refused to respond to the king, Saul, in sinful desperation, made arrangements to consult a medium—a practice he had recently outlawed—in an effort to gain counsel from the deceased Samuel. The spirit of Samuel also refused to instruct Saul, reminding the king of the Lord's rejection of his kingship. The spirit also prophesied that Saul and his sons would die the following day. The episode closed with the woman preparing a sort of last meal for the pitiful king (28:1-25).

The Philistine army assembled at Aphek in preparation for invading Israel. David and his troops dutifully joined this muster. However, the Philistine leaders other than Achish remained suspicious of David and refused to allow David and his men to participate in the impending invasion. Consequently, David and his warriors were discharged and sent back to Ziklag (29:1-11).

In the absence of David and his men from Ziklag, Amalekite [uh MAL uh kight] raiders stormed the town, burned it to the ground, and kidnapped all the residents. David and his men were devastated when they discovered the disaster. Some of the soldiers even blamed David for their loss. However, David turned to God for guidance and mounted a rescue mission (30:1-8).

Assisted by a lone straggler from the Amalekite raiding party, David and his troops pursued and destroyed the Amalekite raiders (30:9-17). A small force of Amalekites escaped, but David recovered all of the people and possessions the Amalekites had captured (30:18-20). A number of David's soldiers had been unable to keep up the rapid pace of his pursuit of the enemy force. However, David insisted that every soldier receive an equal portion of the spoils. Doing so would be a recognition that their victory had come from

God (30:21-25). In the aftermath of his campaign against Amalek, David sent some of the plunder to his supporters in Judah (30:26-31).

The Philistines won a dramatic victory against Israel on Mount Gilboa. Many Israelite soldiers died in the battle, including Saul's three sons. Saul was seriously wounded, and he feared that he might be captured and tortured by the Philistines. Therefore, he commanded his armor-bearer to finish him off. When the armor-bearer refused out of fear, Saul fell on his own sword and died. The Philistines discovered Saul's body the next day. They beheaded the king, stripped off his armor, and hung his corpse on the wall of a nearby town (31:1-10).

The citizens of Jabesh-gilead heard about the king's death. No doubt they remembered how Saul had once rescued them from the Ammonites (11:1-11). Therefore, the men of Jabesh-gilead retrieved the corpses of Saul and his sons, burned them, and then interred the bones with honor (31:11-13).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

DECISION TIME (1 Sam. 30:6-8)

David sought God's direction after a disaster at Ziklag. God directed him to pursue the Amalekite raiders, assuring David of victory.

VERSE 6

David was in a difficult position because the troops talked about stoning him, for they were all very bitter over the loss of their sons and daughters. But David found strength in the LORD his God.

David found himself in **a difficult position** ("greatly distressed," KJV, ESV, NIV). Ever since the Spirit had taken control of David at his anointing (16:13), the future king had lived under providential protection and blessing. This didn't mean, however, that David's life was free of danger and trouble. Indeed, he and his men had been on the run for some time because of King Saul's vendetta against David—with several close calls.

David and his men had fled into Philistine-dominated territory with their families, settling in the city of Ziklag and working from there as mercenaries for a Philistine ruler (27:5-7). They had been called upon by this ruler to muster with the Philistine army for an all-out invasion of Israel. Only some Philistine leaders' distrust of David kept him and his troops from being put in the position of fighting against fellow Israelites. Thus, David and his men were sent home to Ziklag (29:1-7).

However, the temporary absence of David and his men from Ziklag left the city vulnerable to an Amalekite raiding party. The raiders burned the city to the ground and carried off all of the inhabitants as captives, either to hold them for ransom or to sell them as slaves (30:1-5). In any case, David's men reacted to the situation with shock and bitterness. They blamed David and even **talked about stoning him!**

Despite the disastrous losses he and his men incurred, David refused to let the situation master him. In stark contrast to Saul's desperate appeal to a medium for help (28:7-8), **David found strength** ("encouraged himself," KJV) **in the LORD his God**. Crises such as this truly set David apart as a man after God's heart. He battled Goliath "in the name of Yahweh of Hosts, the God of Israel's armies" (17:45). He spared the life of his pursuer, Saul, more than once because he knew Saul was "the LORD's anointed" (24:6; 26:9). Now in this crisis, David again drew upon his relationship with the Lord. The *strength* David received would include encouragement, guidance, and assurance.

VERSE 7

David said to Abiathar the priest, son of Ahimelech, "Bring me the ephod." So Abiathar brought it to him,

Today, believers use prayer and Bible study as means of understanding and obeying God's will. One method of seeking God's guidance in Old Testament times was to inquire of God. This often involved the priesthood, so David reached out to **Abiathar the priest**. Abiathar, the sole survivor of Saul's murder of the priests at Nob, had joined with David (22:20-23).

David instructed Abiathar to bring **the ephod** [EE fahd]. The *ephod* was a sacred priestly garment. The one worn by the high priest was woven from gold, blue, purple, and scarlet material (Ex. 28:6-14). Whether Abiathar's ephod was a high priest's garment or not is unclear. In any case, for the priest to don the sacred garment was a legitimate means of discerning God's will. Thus, David sought God's direction for a proper course of action.

VERSE 8

and David asked the LORD: "Should I pursue these raiders? Will I overtake them?" The LORD replied to him, "Pursue them, for you will certainly overtake them and rescue the people."

David asked God for two specific words of guidance. First, David wanted to know if he should **pursue these raiders** who had attacked Ziklag. Second, he wanted to know if his army would **overtake them**. The latter inquiry likely referred not only to catching up to the attackers but also to defeating them.

Although not stated, Abiathar may have cast lots to discern God's answers. The Urim [YOO rim] and Thummim [THUHM im] served as sacred lots (Ex. 28:30). Little is known about these objects or how they disclosed God's will. Apparently they provided "yes" or "no" answers to properly framed questions. They also could indicate when God refused to reveal an answer. The Lord answered both of David's questions in the affirmative, instructing David to pursue the Amalekites and assuring that he would defeat them.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the articles titled "Ephod" (p. 499) and "Urim and Thummim" (p. 1643) in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. When have you spent extended time in prayer and Bible study regarding a critical life decision? What helped you to discern God's clear guidance?

RECOVERED (1 Sam. 30:18-20)

David's troops were already spent physically and emotionally from their three-day march from the Philistine front to Ziklag (about 55 miles) and from the horror of seeing their city burnt and their families gone. Nevertheless, having received a promise of success from God, David and his men set out in pursuit of the Amalekites. The men had traveled only about 15 miles when David had to leave one-third of his soldiers at the side of a small riverbed. These soldiers were simply too exhausted to continue (30:9-10). David and the remaining troops took up the pursuit again, receiving much-needed help from an abandoned Egyptian slave who led them to the Amalekites' camp. David and his men caught the Amalekites in a drunken celebration and swiftly struck them down (30:11-17).

VERSE 18

David recovered everything the Amalekites had taken; he also rescued his two wives.

The success God promised to David was sure and complete. He **recovered everything the Amalekites had taken**. All of the stolen property and every one of the Israelite captives were rescued. The Lord had guided David to go after the raiders. David obeyed God and secured an astonishing victory. The triumph incorporated personal success for the future king as well. David's **two wives**—Abigail and Ahinoam [uh HIN oh am] of Jezreel (see 25:43)—were among the **rescued** captives.

VERSES 19-20

Nothing of theirs was missing from the youngest to the oldest, including the sons and daughters, of all the plunder the Amalekites had taken. David got everything back. He took all the sheep and cattle, which were driven ahead of the other livestock, and the people shouted, “This is David’s plunder!”

These two verses describe in greater detail what the Amalekites had captured in their raid on Ziklag and, therefore, what David and his men recovered. The phrase **nothing of theirs** might seem to point only to David and his family. Given the larger context, however, the plural pronoun *theirs* likely refers not only to David but also to all of his men. In 30:8, the Lord had promised that David would “rescue the people”—meaning all of the people who had been taken as captives.

The statement rendered **David got everything back** literally reads, “David caused all to return.” During the time that David and his men were absent from Ziklag, the Amalekites had taken captive all of the town’s residents, **from the youngest to the oldest, including the sons and daughters**. David and his men were able to rescue every one of the captives. None died, and not one individual remained missing. Furthermore, the Amalekites had stolen the people’s household valuables as well as their animals. The rescuers recovered all of the plunder the Amalekites had taken.

First Samuel 30:14 reveals that the Amalekites had attacked other settlements in the same sweeping raid that destroyed Ziklag (including some settlements in southern Judah around Hebron). Whether the Amalekites took human captives from these other settlements is not certain, but they clearly made off with livestock. David’s men rounded up **all the sheep and cattle** that had been stolen. They were careful to separate the livestock of the citizens of Ziklag from the other livestock. The men declared that the other livestock was rightfully **David’s plunder** (“David’s spoil,” KJV, ESV) as the victorious commander. David later sent gifts from the plunder to his friends and town leaders in Judah (30:26-31). The successful rescue of family and possessions underscored David’s continuing rise in status among the people of Israel.

EXPLORE FURTHER

What is the closest you have ever been to a situation of needing to rescue someone or something? Have you ever been in a situation of needing to be rescued? In what ways is salvation in Christ like being rescued?

VICTORY FOR ALL (1 Sam. 30:21-25)

Some of David's men questioned whether the troops who had stopped for rest—and thus had not fought—deserved to receive any treasure except their rescued family members. David decreed that every member of his army would receive an equal portion of what was recovered. He viewed this decree as a way of acknowledging God's hand in the victory.

VERSE 21

When David came to the 200 men who had been too exhausted to go with him and had been left at the Wadi Besor, they came out to meet him and to meet the troops with him. When David approached the men, he greeted them,

After recovering their families and worldly goods, David's army headed back to Ziklag. The **Wadi Besor** [WAH dih BEE sawr] was a stream located approximately 15 miles south of Ziklag. Wadis were watercourses that often remained dry until the rainy season. Wadi Besor was the largest and deepest watercourse in southern Judah. During the rainy season, it could quickly transform into a raging torrent. The **200 men** David had left there may have been too weak to scale the steep banks of the watercourse.

By the time David and his men returned to *Wadi Besor*, however, the soldiers left there had recuperated from their fatigue and **came out to meet** their commander and the victorious **troops**. David promptly **greeted** ("saluted," KJV) his men. This Hebrew verb can also mean "to ask something" or in certain contexts can signify a demand made by a superior. Hence, David may have first asked about the men's condition and then ordered them to unite with the rest of the troops.

VERSE 22

but all the corrupt and worthless men among those who had gone with David argued, "Because they didn't go with us, we will not give any of the plunder we recovered to them except for each man's wife and children. They may take them and go."

Some of the victorious troops resented the soldiers who had remained behind. All of David's troops had suffered fatigue as they raced to overtake the Amalekite raiding party. While one-third of the men had succumbed to exhaustion at Wadi Besor, two-thirds had pushed on with their commander and then had fought a successful battle against a larger enemy force. A bitter complaint surfaced among some of the victorious warriors that the soldiers who had stayed behind did not deserve to receive any of the plunder.

The biblical writer did not mince words in labeling the character of these complainers, describing them as **corrupt and worthless men** (“wicked men and men of Belial,” KJV; “evil men and troublemakers,” NIV). The word translated *corrupt* denotes a person of deficient moral character. The term rendered *worthless* comes from a root word that means “to become old and worn out; to be empty of value.” Thus the complainers were empty of goodness and integrity regarding their fellow warriors. This same Hebrew term later was used in Jewish writings as a descriptive name for Satan (see also 2 Cor. 6:15).

The complaining men proposed that the soldiers who stayed behind be awarded only their rescued family members. The words **they may take them and go** reveal that the complainers wanted David to discharge the 200 weaker soldiers from his army. However, David realized the men were neither cowards nor weaklings. They had simply been pushed beyond their physical limits. Moreover, discharging the men would weaken David’s force by a third. Such a reduction could prove disastrous if the Amalekites regrouped or another enemy appeared on the scene. Indeed, at this time David’s army constituted the only organized military force left to defend Israel. The Philistines were about to rout Saul’s army (1 Sam. 31:1-6), and the nation would face some of its bleakest days. David needed more men, not fewer.

VERSE 23

But David said, “My brothers, you must not do this with what the LORD has given us. He protected us and handed over to us the raiders who came against us.

David demonstrated his superb leadership skills during this crisis within his army. He began by addressing the disgruntled soldiers as **my brothers**. (Having served in combat as an infantry soldier, I can attest to the bond that forms between soldiers who have fought battles together.) David did not ignore the complainers’ point of view or berate their grievance. Instead, he called attention to the men’s relationship with him and with the other soldiers. Moreover, by addressing his men in this way, David reminded them of an even more significant bond. All of them were related intimately in the Lord’s covenant with Israel.

With the foundation of their covenant relationship established, David set forth his analysis of the recent victory. David’s exhausted army had come up against a larger enemy force. Without diminishing his army’s bravery, determination, and skill, David gave **the LORD** ultimate credit for their lopsided victory. The Lord had protected David and his men and had **handed over** (“delivered,” KJV) the Amalekites to them.

VERSE 24

Who can agree to your proposal? The share of the one who goes into battle is to be the same as the share of the one who remains with the supplies. They will share equally.”

David argued that the complaining soldiers’ proposal was untenable. The plunder gained in battle was a gift from the Lord. Therefore any decision about the distribution of the plunder belonged to the Lord, not to the victorious soldiers. Indeed, protection and victory could be counted as the Lord’s greatest gifts to the soldiers.

David spoke of two distinct tasks assigned to soldiers during a military campaign. The phrase **one who goes into battle** refers to troops engaged in the battle. A battle commander typically does not deploy all of his soldiers into a battle at one time. Some troops are held in reserve as reinforcements. Others may be tasked with guarding, transporting, or distributing **supplies** for the troops engaged in combat. All of these troops play important roles in the army’s success in its mission. Thus, David decreed that all of his soldiers would **share equally** in the joy of victory and the reward of plunder.

VERSE 25

And it has been so from that day forward. David established this policy as a law and an ordinance for Israel and it continues to this very day.

David established the policy of equal shares for everyone, regardless of a soldier’s specific role. Later when he became king, **David established this policy as a law and an ordinance for Israel.** The phrase **to this very day** refers to the time when the Book of 1 Samuel was written. The policy reminded all Israelites that the Lord was forever their Source of victory, success, and prosperity. The principle reappears in New Testament times in Jesus’ parable of the vineyard workers (Matt. 20:1-16) and in Paul’s analogy of the church as the body of Christ (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:12-31).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Church” on pages 295-297 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What are some ways David’s policy about equal shares can be seen as operating today in God’s kingdom in general? In a local church?

The Kingdom of Saul



THE KINGDOM OF SAUL

1 SAM. 11, 13, 14; 14:47-48

ATTACK ROUTES

- Ammonites' route
- Saul's routes
- Jonathan's (Saul's son) routes
- Israel's routes
- Philistines' routes
- Saul's pressure

- Capital city
- City
- City (uncertain location)
- Mountain peak
- Pass
- Battle
- Saul's kingdom
- Aramean lands
- Moab
- Ammon
- Amalekites
- Edom
- Philistine heartland
- Philistine encroachments
- Phoenicia

1 Samuel

Beheadings! Greedy and immoral priests! Witchcraft! Murder and intrigue at the highest levels of government! Can you believe this is in Scripture? It's there, and sadly it was real life in the time of Samuel. Everyone did whatever they wanted—long before that became a modern slogan.

God was there too. In one of the darkest periods of Israel's history, God was working providentially, yet relentlessly, to bring about humanity's salvation. He quietly gave a desperate, praying, childless woman a son named Samuel who grew up to become one of the greatest prophets, prayer-warriors, and kingmakers in Israel. God then used Samuel to call out a shepherd boy, David, to become Israel's most beloved king. In all of this, God was pointing to the time He would send His Son Jesus to be our Eternal Savior and the King of kings.



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