

TIM CHESTER

THIS IS FOR YOU
TO **READ**, EXCITING YOU
ABOUT YOUR SHEPHERD KING.

THIS IS FOR YOU
TO **FEED**, HELPING YOU
MEDITATE ON GOD'S
WORD DAY BY DAY.

THIS IS FOR YOU
TO **LEAD**, EQUIPPING YOU
TO TEACH THE BIBLE TO
OTHERS. THIS IS

1 SAMUEL FOR YOU

TIM CHESTER
1 SAMUEL
FOR YOU

the goodbook
COMPANY

Series Preface

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centred
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *1 Samuel For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **grey** when they first appear, and are explained in a

glossary towards the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

Introduction to 1 Samuel

We live in an age when personal freedom is perhaps our culture's highest value.

You're not the boss of me.

Don't impose your views on me.

What gives you the right to tell me what to do?

Or, to put it another way, when the history of our age is written, it could be summed up as a time when "everyone did as they saw fit". Those words could be the anthem of our time. In fact, they are actually the closing words of the book of Judges (Judges 21:25). This attitude is not new.

In the Hebrew Bible, unlike in our English Bibles, the order of the books means that 1 Samuel follows Judges (Ruth belongs to "the writings" and so comes later). So the last thing you read before the opening of the book of Samuel in the Hebrew Bible is the last verse of Judges: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit".

In many ways, the story told in 1 and 2 Samuel is the solution to this problem. The books of 1 and 2 Samuel were originally one book, the book of Samuel. The book of Samuel starts with no king, and ends with a king.

The days when Israel had no king were days of moral anarchy. The final chapters of the book of Judges make for grim reading. These are the stories you were never taught in Sunday school. They are ugly and brutal. This is what life is like when there is no king and everyone does as they see fit.

But the situation is more ambiguous. It is true that Israel had no king; but fundamentally, that was because they refused to acknowledge God as their king. The LORD was to be Israel's king. The real problem was not the lack of a

king, but a lack of obedience to God as king.

This ambiguity continues into the book of Samuel. We will see Israel asking for a king, and we will see God regarding that as a rejection of his rule. We will see the rule of the first king, Saul, and wonder whether Israel having a king is much of an improvement on Israel having no king. Even the rise of King David in the second half of 1 Samuel and his rule in 2 Samuel prove a mixed blessing.

So 1 Samuel leaves us looking beyond this history of ancient Israel. Israel's kings were anointed with oil, so they were known as "the anointed one"—"messiah" in Hebrew, or "christ" in Greek. As we see the disastrous reign of Saul, the king Israel asked for, and as we see the flawed reign of David, the king God blessed his people with, we are being pointed towards *the* Christ, the one man who rules God's people in the way God wants. God himself promised David that one of his sons would reign over God's people for ever (2 Samuel 7). And so the history of the first christs leaves us longing for the rule of the ultimate Christ.

The distinctive themes and emphases of 1 Samuel will become clear as the story unfolds, and we will draw them together in the final chapter. There we will return to the question of why the book was written. But as we read 1 Samuel, we will see Jesus Christ. And seeing him in and through 1 Samuel will enable us to see him with fresh colour and texture, and see afresh what it means for us to follow him as King in an age that worships personal freedom.

Two Notes on the Book

Who wrote the books of 1 and 2 Samuel? The short answer is that we do not know. They are named after the prophet Samuel, but this does not mean he

wrote them. In the Greek version of the Old Testament, they are called “1 and 2 Kingdoms”. And Samuel’s death is described in 1 Samuel 25:1, so he could not have written about the events after this point. Nevertheless, Samuel may have been one source for the books: 1 Chronicles 29:29 talks about “the records of Samuel the seer”. The books were probably compiled from different sources.

And what kind of genre is this? A useful description is that this is a *preached history*. In other words, it is real history. It is not a collection of parables or fables—the events it describes really did happen. But it is more than a record of events. 1 Chronicles 29:29 says: “As for the events of King David’s reign, from beginning to end, they are written in the records of Samuel the seer, the records of Nathan the prophet and the records of Gad the seer.” There were other historical annals. The writer of Samuel is doing more than creating a historical record. He is writing with a purpose. What he records is never less than historical, but as we read it, we are doing much more than reading history. We are being shown who God is and how he rules his people; and we are being shown Jesus, his Christ.

1 SAMUEL 1 VERSE 1 TO 2 VERSE 11

1. A Coming King

When you look at the state of the church today, or when you look at the state of your nation and its culture, what do you see? It is hard to avoid the sense that in some ways there is a crisis. God is not acknowledged. His ways are not followed. Perhaps there is nothing new in that. But today, God is scorned and opposed. The **new atheists**^[1] describe themselves as “**anti-theists**”. It is not just that they have differing ideas. They are actively anti-God.

The books of 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel were originally one book, the book of Samuel. In the Hebrew Bible, they follow directly after Judges 21:25: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit”. That could be the motto of our age: everyone does as they see fit. You can make up your own morality. You can decide for yourself what is right. If you read the final chapters of Judges, then you soon discover that a culture living by this rule is truly ugly. How do we live in this kind of situation?

Four times at the close of Judges we are told that “in those days Israel had no king” (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Then 1 Samuel opens: “There was a certain man” (1 Samuel **1:1**^[2]) and we are bound to wonder: *Is this the man who will be king in Israel?* It quickly becomes clear he is not. But that is what the book of Samuel is about—the man who will be king in Israel.

The only other time the phrase “a certain man” is used in the Bible is in the opening to the story of **Samson** (Judges 13:2). So the writer of Samuel immediately alerts us to the fact that we are in the time of the Judges (and indeed Samuel and Samson may well have been contemporaries). We are

waiting for a king. This is why Elkanah is introduced with a long **genealogy** (1 Samuel **1:1**). If you are familiar with stories of Israel's kings (as later readers in Old Testament times would probably have been), then it sounds like the introduction to a king.

So we are being led to expect this to be the story of King Elkanah. But this is not what we get. We expect the story of a king... and we are given the very domestic story of one woman's private grief—so private that it is not even voiced.

Hannah's story is structured in a chiasmic pattern (named after the Greek letter *chi*, which is shaped like an "x"), in which the first and last events are parallel, the second and penultimate events are parallel, and so on. At the heart of the story is the coming of Samuel.

- a. Elkanah and his family go from Ramah to Shiloh (**1:1-8**)
 - b. Hannah's prayer of misery (**v 9-11**)
 - c. Eli and Hannah in conversation (**v 12-18**)
 - d. Samuel is born (**v 19-23**)
 - c'. Eli and Hannah in conversation (**v 24-28**)
 - b'. Hannah's prayer of joy (**2:1-10**)
- a'. Elkanah and his family return from Shiloh to Ramah (**v 11**)

Hannah's Plight

1:2 suggests Hannah was Elkanah's first wife; **verse 5** says she was his first love. The name Hannah means "favoured". But she is **barren**; and so Elkanah

takes a second wife, Peninnah. To make matters worse for Hannah, the name Peninnah means “fruitful”, and true to her name, Peninnah has children. We are not told how many she had, but **verse 4** talks about “all her sons and daughters”. **Verse 2** puts it starkly: “Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.”

Barrenness had added meaning in Old Testament Israel. The promise of a Saviour to Adam (Genesis 3:15) and **offspring** to Abraham (Genesis 22:17-18) meant people were looking for a Saviour from within Israel. Every new birth raised the question: *Is this the one?* Without children there was no future for God’s people and ultimately no hope for the world. So barrenness was a personal tragedy, just as it is today. But it also carried a sense of exclusion from the purposes of God’s people. That Hannah’s primary concern is participation in the future of God’s people is perhaps reinforced by the fact that when she receives a child, she gives him back to God (1 Samuel **1:28**).

Verse 5 is **ambiguous**. It probably means: “Although he loved Hannah, he would give Hannah only one portion, because the LORD had closed her womb” (RSV). Elkanah is being scrupulously fair. It is one portion per person. But that means Peninnah is given several portions for herself and all her children (**v 4**), while Hannah just receives one. It is fair, but it accentuates Hannah’s loss. Every year when they go to Shiloh to worship God, it’s another reminder that she is barren and Peninnah is fruitful. And every year is an opportunity for Peninnah to “provoke” Hannah (**v 6**). She is called Hannah’s “rival”. This is *not* a happy family. And “this went on year after year”; time and time again, Hannah suffered, “till she wept and would not eat” (**v 7**).

Hannah’s Prayer

Hannah's womb was closed. But why? Because "the LORD had closed her womb" (v 5). God is **sovereign**, and so he is sovereign over our suffering. Whatever the medical causes for Hannah's barrenness, ultimately it was God who had closed her womb. The key thing is what you do with this information.

- For Peninnah it is a reason to mock Hannah. They come to worship God (v 3), and you can imagine Peninnah saying: *What have you got to worship God for? "Hannah"—that means "favoured". So how has God favoured you? By closing your womb!*
- For Elkanah, it is a reason to pity Hannah. He says: "Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?" (v 8). Perhaps Elkanah wants Hannah to show more interest in him than in her childless state.
- For Hannah, it is a reason to pray. If God has closed her womb, then maybe God might also open her womb. In **verse 9**, God's sovereignty spurs her into action. Up until this point things have happened *to* Hannah. She is passive. But now she stands up from the meal and goes to the **LORD's house** to pray (v 10-11).

Eli the priest sees Hannah praying. Her lips are moving, but she is not speaking aloud (v 12-13). So Eli thinks she is drunk (v 14). "'Not so, my lord,' Hannah replied, 'I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief'" (v 15-16). She was not intoxicated. She was praying.

True Prayer

This is true prayer. There is a brand of spirituality that says true prayer is

about quiet and contemplation. Sometimes the implication is that the more spiritual you are, the more calm and composed you will be. It is not true. Hannah's prayer—which is a prayer, as we'll see, that God answers—arises from:

- deep anguish (**v 10**)
- bitter weeping (**v 10**)
- misery (**v 11**)
- being deeply troubled (**v 15**)
- great anguish and grief (**v 16**)

If you are experiencing anguish or bitterness, then you are in a good place to pray well! Perhaps your problems mean your mind is all over the place, so you find it hard to concentrate in prayer. But actually that is the kind of condition that produces good praying. Prayer is not a technique we need to master. It is “pouring out [your] soul to the LORD” (**v 15**).

One of the main reasons we do not pray more is that we do not feel the need to pray. We think we can manage without God, and so our prayers end up a duty to perform, options in our busy day. Prayer was not a duty or an option for Hannah! She did not get up from the meal because she had realised that she had not had her quiet time that day. It was the cry of an anguished soul.

The main image Jesus gives of prayer is a child asking her father for help. And three-year-olds do not ask for things in a quiet and contemplative way! They insist, they shout, they clamour, they persist. There are children who are quiet. If a child cries and no one ever comes, then eventually they stop crying. There are orphanages where children have been neglected to the point where an eerie silence hangs over the dormitories. The point is this: the cry of a child is a cry of faith. It reflects their belief that there is someone out there who hears them and responds to them. Of course, they are also selfish, and often we struggle to work out what they want, so it can get fraught! But it is essentially a cry of faith. And the cry of prayer is a cry of

faith. It arises from the belief that God is a Father who is able (powerful enough) and willing (loving enough) to answer.

What creates great praying? A deep sense of our need and a deep sense of God's care.

How to Go in Peace

Eli recognises this: "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him" (v 17). Hannah replies: "May your servant find favour in your eyes" (v 18). Remember, the name "Hannah" means "favoured", so she is punning on her name, saying in effect: *May the favoured one be favoured.*

Then Hannah eats. It is a sign that she is no longer in anguish. "Her face was no longer downcast" (v 18). This is really striking. Hannah does not yet know how God will answer her prayer. But the point is that she *has* prayed: and now she is happy to leave it with him. She is a model of the truth expressed in Philippians 4:6-7: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Hannah has presented her request to the LORD. Now she knows the peace of having poured out her heart in prayer to the God who knows all things, and who cares for all his people.

God's Answer

The favoured one is favoured. Hannah becomes pregnant and gives birth to a boy (1 Samuel **1:19-20**).

Names are often significant, especially when the act of naming and the meaning of the name are described in the text. Hannah not only names her child, but explains why: “Because I asked the LORD for him” (**v 20**). The name “Samuel” actually means “his name is God”. But the Hebrew word “ask for” is *sa’al*. It is close enough for Hannah’s explanation of his name to make sense. Samuel is the child that was asked for, from the one who is God.

This emphasis on asking runs through the story. In **verse 17**, Eli literally says: “Your asking that you have asked”—*the request you have requested*, we might say. In effect he says: *May God give you the samuel you’ve samueled*. When Hannah fulfils her vow and presents Samuel for service in the **tabernacle**, she says: “I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he shall be given over to the LORD” (**v 27-28**). In Hebrew, the word “to give” or “to dedicate” or “to lend” is from the same root as the word “to ask” (because lending is what you do in response to someone asking). So again there are four references to asking in these two verses. Literally what Hannah says is: “The LORD has granted me the asking that I asked of him. So now I give the response to my asking to the LORD. For his whole life he shall be given as a response to my asking to the LORD.”

The point the writer is making is this: Hannah asks and the LORD gives. The LORD closes Hannah’s womb and the LORD opens Hannah’s womb. God answers prayer. Of course, he does not always give us exactly what we asked for. There were many barren women in Israel who did not receive a child. But he does “look on [his] servant’s misery” (**v 11**) and he does respond to our prayers in his love and wisdom and power. Jesus says: “Ask and it will be given to you” (Luke 11:9). But how often we do not ask. We think we can rely on ourselves; or we think that we cannot rely on God. “You do not have because you do not ask God” (James 4:2).

But there is something else going on here. There is a foretaste of what is to

come in the story. For “*sa’al*” is actually even closer to another Hebrew name, the name “Saul”. Saul is the king whom Samuel will anoint, because the people have “asked for” a king. Having been repeated again and again in chapter 1, the word does not recur until 1 Samuel 8:10, when the elders of Israel ask for a king. The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are dominated by three figures: Samuel, Saul and David. Samuel is the child that Hannah asked for and Saul is the king the people asked for. But who is David?

Questions for reflection

1. How does Hannah's praying encourage you in your own?
2. Is there anything you need to pray about, and then pursue feeling at peace about?
3. Is there anything you do not ask for in prayer because, deep down, you think the Lord cannot or will not give it? Could Hannah's example prompt you to start praying for it regularly and boldly?

PART TWO

The LORD Makes Good His Word

Hannah's story is not told to illustrate ordinary life. The message is not that every childless woman who prays for a child will receive one. Hannah's story is told because it points to something bigger, something "extra-ordinary".

When Hannah asks God to "look on your servant's misery" (**1:11**), she is echoing the language of God's relationship to Israel during the exodus. In Exodus 3:7 the LORD says: "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt". Then in Exodus 4:31 we read: "And when they heard that the LORD was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshipped."

Hannah's name means "favoured", but she is not favoured. In the same way, Israel is favoured (in the sense of having been chosen by God), but not favoured (because they are living in crisis). In Hebrew the word "favour" also means "**grace**". In Hannah's time, Israel has received God's grace. But at this point in their history, Israel is not favoured. The end of the book of Judges shows that the nation is in turmoil. Just as Hannah is barren, so is Israel. They are not bearing fruit.

In 1 Samuel **1:21**, it is again time for Elkanah and his family to make their sacrifices at Shiloh—but this time, Hannah has a baby boy, and this time, Hannah does not go with her husband (**v 22**). In **verse 23** Elkanah says: "Do what seems best to you ... Stay here until you have weaned him; only may the LORD make good his word." It is an odd thing to say. Hannah is the one who has made a vow which she needs to make good. God has not said

anything at all! What is the LORD's word that he will keep? There has been no mention of a word from God in the story. And it cannot be the gift of a child, because the child has already been given.

The answer is that the word the LORD has given is his word to his people. God has promised to bless his people and make them a blessing to the nations. What is happening to Hannah is part of that larger word, a sign of the larger purposes of God for his people. **Verse 19** says: "The LORD remembered". This does not mean that God is forgetful, and suddenly said to himself: *Ah yes, I must enable Hannah to fall pregnant. It had slipped my mind!* "Remembering" has a more specific meaning. It means God acting in accordance with his **covenant** promises, as he did at the beginning of the exodus story (Exodus 2:23-25).

And so Hannah returns to the place she had cried out for a son (1 Samuel **1:24**). This time, though, is very different, because she is able to take "the boy with her" (**v 24**). She is the woman who Eli saw praying (**v 26-27**); now she is the woman to whom God has "granted what I asked of him" (**v 27**). She has come not in desperation but in thankfulness, and to give her son to him (**v 28**).

Hannah's Song

Then there is Hannah's song, or prayer, in 1 Samuel **2:1-10**. It is an odd song for a new mother to sing. Apart from **verse 5**, it is not the song of a woman who has received a child. "The bows of the warriors are broken" (**v 4**). "The LORD will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to his king" (**v 10**). This is not how I would write a song to mark the arrival of a new baby!

But the clues in Hannah's story are made explicit in Hannah's song. Hannah's story is a picture of Israel's story—and, indeed, humanity's story.

Like Hannah, we are barren and fruitless—spiritually speaking. But the movement in Hannah’s story is from a barren woman to a fruitful woman. We see God bringing life where there is no life. Like Hannah, we are beset by enemies. Israel’s enemies were the Philistines; and they were in one sense a picture of the enemies that humanity faces, the enemies of sin and death. But the movement in Hannah’s story is from a woman “provoked” by her “rival” (1:6) to a woman who can say: “My mouth boasts over my enemies” (2:1).

Hannah’s song is full of reversals. In 1:8 Elkanah asked Hannah: “Why are you downhearted?” It is literally: “Why is your heart sad?” Now Hannah’s song begins: “My heart rejoices” (2:1). A horn in the Bible is a picture of strength. It’s animal imagery. Imagine a rhino goring its enemy and then lifting high its bloodied horn as a sign of victory. So Hannah says: “My horn is lifted high”. Hannah was provoked by her enemy (1:6). Now she says: “My mouth boasts over my enemies” (2:2). It is literally: “My mouth is wide against my enemies”—wide to boast in triumph. But perhaps (given the animal imagery of the horn in the previous line) it is also wide to roar or even devour.

Elkanah’s family was a **microcosm** of Israel, divided between the high and low, between the proud and humble (or humbled). Hannah’s story is the plot of the books of Samuel in miniature.

Hannah’s song starts with the word “my”, which is repeated three times in **verse 1**. But after that, the focus pans out to what is true for God’s people as a whole. “The LORD” is mentioned nine times in the song. He is the actor in this song. He is sovereign. The key verse is **verse 2**: “There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God”. (This is also the refrain of David’s song at the close of Samuel in 2 Samuel 22:2-3, 32, 47; 23:3.) And it is his opinion that matters, not ours or that of those around us (1 Samuel 2:3).

What the holy LORD has done for Hannah is a picture of and pointer to what he will do for his people. In **verses 4-10**, Hannah lists a series of reversals

that clearly move beyond her personal experience to the experience of God's people as a whole. Indeed the reversals that Hannah describes are rooted in creation: "For the foundations of the earth are the LORD's; on them he has set the world" (v 8). At creation, God turned darkness into light, emptiness into fulness and chaos into order.

Hannah's song serves as the key to interpreting the story of 1 and 2 Samuel. In these lines, we hear all of the main themes of the book. "It is not by strength that one prevails" (v 9)—we will see that it is not human power that counts, but divine power. "The LORD ... brings low and he exalts" (v 7, ESV)—this sets the agenda for the book. The first time we meet Saul we are told he is "a head taller than anyone else" (9:2). But at the end of 1 Samuel he is "fallen on Mount Gilboa" (31:5, 8). The refrain of David's lament for Saul is: "How the mighty have fallen" (2 Samuel 1:19, 25, 27). In contrast, the first time we meet David he is described as "the youngest" or "the smallest" of Jesse's sons (1 Samuel 16:11). Yet at the end of his life he will sing, as Hannah does at the start of 1 Samuel: "You exalted me above my foes" (2 Samuel 22:49).

Hannah's story is told because it is part of a bigger story—the story of God's provision of a Saviour. Hannah's son, Samuel, will re-establish God's rule over God's people, replacing the corrupt regime of Hophni and Phinehas (1 Samuel 1:3; 2:12-17). He will deliver the people from their enemies and judge them with justice (7:2-17).

Perhaps Hannah is a picture, too, of the church in our generation. We are favoured by God, but appear to be barren. In most of the west we lack children in the sense of converts, certainly in significant numbers. Instead, like Hannah, we are mocked by our rivals. So we need Hannah's story and song as a reminder that the gospel will triumph and God will vindicate his name.

In the meantime what should we do? "In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD" (1:10). It would be wonderful if, in centuries' time, whether in this world or in eternity, that could also be said of the church in our

generation. Our churches' barrenness, our weakness, should turn us to the Lord in desperate prayer, not away from him in resigned defeat.

Hannah concludes her song with these words: "He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed" (**2:10**). This may not strike us as particularly remarkable. But it is actually a big surprise... because at this point in the story there is no king in Israel! What Hannah's song says is this: *God's king is coming and when he comes, he will turn the world upside down*. And that directs our attention forward in the story.

Mary's Song

But before we look forward, we must first look back. One reason Hannah could see her personal experience as a picture of God's purposes for his people is that her experience was not new. She was not the first barren woman in the Bible to receive a child. Indeed each of the founding patriarchs of Israel (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) had a barren wife: Sarah (Genesis 15:1-6; 17:17-21; 18:10-15; 21:1-7), Rebekah (Genesis 25:21) and Rachel (Genesis 29:30-31). The parallels with Rachel are particularly striking. Both Rachel and Hannah have a rival who is able to have children, even while they themselves enjoy their husbands' greater love (Genesis 29:30-31).

The parallels do not end with the patriarchs. Samson, too, is born to a woman who has previously been barren (Judges 13). Numbers 6 makes provision for a special "Nazirite" vow, which was normally temporary. But Samson is to be a permanent Nazirite and, although Samuel is not described as a Nazirite, he too is presented as a permanent Nazirite (1 Samuel **1:28**).

Then looking forward through Bible history, the other person who appears to be a permanent Nazirite is John the Baptist. And he, too, is born to a

previously barren woman (Luke 1:5-25, 57-80). The parallel between Hannah and **Elizabeth** is especially significant. If Elizabeth is the new Hannah, then John must be the new Samuel. Samuel prepared the way for David. John prepares the way for Jesus, the new David. Jesus is the coming King.

All the way through the story, God gives children to barren women. It is an indication that salvation will be accomplished only through his power and grace. God promises a people to Abraham who will bless all nations. But if Abraham cannot have children, then the promise goes nowhere fast. It seems as if God has made a mistake by picking the wrong couple. But God chooses a barren couple to demonstrate that from beginning to end his salvation will be accomplished through his power and grace. He is “the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not” (Romans 4:17).

Time after time he chooses barren women to play a key part in the bloodline of the Saviour. But when it comes to the Saviour himself, God goes one better for the Saviour is born to a virgin! This is the ultimate demonstration that salvation comes through God’s power.

Like Hannah, Mary sings a song in response to her conception. A comparison of 1 Samuel **2:1-10** and Luke 1:46-55 suggests Mary’s song is a deliberate echo of Hannah’s. Both rejoice in God’s provision, but see it as a picture of what God will do for his people. Both describe a series of similar reversals. What happened to Hannah is the beginning of the story of David’s rise to his throne. In the same way, what happened to Mary is the beginning of the story of the rise of Jesus to his throne. God’s King is coming; and when he comes, he will turn the world upside down.

Hannah sings: “The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts” (1 Samuel **2:6-7**). Jesus takes those who are dead in sin and gives new life in his name. Jesus takes those weighed down by guilt and lifts them up to sit with him in glory. He brings down to judgment those who proudly defy God, but exalts those who humbly admit their need.

Which Side of History?

The question this story leaves us with is: *Which side of history are you on?* There are two kingdoms in history: the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God's King. And there are two types of people: those who defy God or ignore him, and those who humble themselves before him. There is a fault line running through history. On one side are the self-righteous and self-reliant. On the other are those who are humbled by their sin. Sometimes they are humiliated by the scorn of this world.

Maybe you have made gospel choices which mean you cannot afford the lifestyle of your neighbours. Maybe you have chosen to give your time to serve others rather than indulging yourself. Maybe you have served on a children's camp instead of going on holiday, or as a **Street pastor** instead of being asleep in bed. Maybe you have taken on a draining pastoral situation. Maybe you have made choices that mean you face hostility. You speak for Christ even though it will harm your career or ruin your day. Maybe you are childless like Hannah and have chosen not to accept fertility treatment that would mean unused human embryos are destroyed. The message of Hannah's story and Hannah's song is this: *It is worth it.*

Samuel Zwemer, the so-called "apostle to Islam", lost two daughters in an eight-day period. Barclay Buxton, the pioneering missionary to Japan, also lost two daughters. At one point, the average life expectancy of missionaries to West Africa was six months. But still they went, wave after wave of them, knowing it meant death. Was it worth it? Yes, it was.

It is worth it because God's King is coming, and when he comes he will turn the world upside down. What is lost in this life will be gained for eternity (Mark 8:34-38). Hannah sings: "He humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust ... and makes them inherit a throne of honour" (1 Samuel **2:7-**

8). That is your future if you humble yourself before God. Your King has promised: “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:11).

How do we know? Because Jesus himself has paved the way. He “did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage”. Instead he took “the very nature of a servant ... and ... humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:6-8). At the cross, Jesus was brought down to the grave (1 Samuel **2:6**). He was humble, humbled and humiliated (**v 7**). But God made him alive (**v 6**). God raised him from the grave (**v 7**). God seated him on “a throne of honour” (**v 8**). Jesus was brought lower than Hannah was, and lower than you and I could ever be; but “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name” (Philippians 2:9). In the ascension of Jesus, God has taken the first step in turning the world upside down.

You must be humble. You may be humbled. You may even be humiliated. But it is worth it. Always.

Questions for reflection

1. Which phrase of Hannah's prayer particularly encourages you today?
2. How is your sin humbling you, or the world scorning you, right now?
3. In which part of your life do you need to remember: It is worth it? How will you allow the truth that God's King has come to make a difference to you today?

1 SAMUEL 2 VERSE 11 TO 4 VERSE 1

2. A Coming Priest and Prophet

There was a crisis in Israel. Everyone did as they saw fit. There were no moral absolutes; and the result was chaos and darkness. In short, it was a nation blighted by sin.

Part of God's solution was the provision for **atonement** through priests and sacrifices. If you sinned—when you sinned—you could come to the tabernacle, or tent of meeting, the place of God's presence, and find atonement through a sacrifice offered by a priest.

The problem was that this crisis extended right into the house of God. Far from pointing the way back to God, the priests were leading the way in turning from God. In her song, Hannah looked to a time when the proud, the arrogant and the full would be brought down (1 Samuel 2:3-5). Such people, we might suppose, would be found among Israel's enemies. But as chapter 2 unfolds, the first place we encounter them is among Israel's priests in Shiloh!

Shiloh was where the tabernacle was first set up (Joshua 18:1) and was the place of significant national assemblies (Joshua 18:1-10; 19:51; 21:2). This was effectively the capital city and national religious centre. And it was rotten.

The Wicked Sons

1 Samuel **2:11** transitions us from the story of Hannah to the story of Eli, with Samuel as the link between them. The story of Eli's house begins: "Eli's sons were scoundrels; they had no regard for the LORD" (**v 12**). "Scoundrels" is the NIV's rendering of "sons of Belial" or "sons of wickedness". The phrase "the son of" is often used metaphorically to indicate character. But "the sons of Eli were sons of wickedness" also suggests Eli was complicit in this wickedness.

The priests' first offence is against the people (**v 13-14**). The priests were entitled to the breast and the right thigh of sacrifices (Leviticus 7:31-32; Deuteronomy 18:3). But Hophni and Phinehas are exploiting the people they were meant to be serving. They are getting their servant to take whatever meat he can spear with a fork. The word translated "practice" or "custom" is literally "justice" (it is from the same root as the word used to describe "the judges"). This is the justice of Hophni and Phinehas—to steal the food being offered for sacrifice.

1 Samuel **2:15** begins "moreover" (ESV). There is more to their crimes. Why? They were also mistreating, in fact robbing, God (**v 15-16**). The fat of the animal was the LORD's portion (Leviticus 3:3-4, 9-10, 14-16). It was called "the LORD's food offerings and "the bread of his God" (Leviticus 21:21-22, ESV). But Hophni and Phinehas insisted on taking the meat with the fat still on it, stealing the LORD's portion—by force, if necessary (1 Samuel **2:16**). The verdict is clear: "This sin of the young men was very great in the LORD's sight, for they were treating the LORD's offering with contempt" (**v 17**).

And things get even worse: "Now Eli, who was very old, heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel and how they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting" (**v 22**). Hophni and Phinehas are turning the tabernacle into a brothel.

The Indulgent Father

Eli hears what his sons are doing and confronts them (**v 22-25**). But his leadership is ineffectual (**v 25**). Perhaps we are tempted to sympathise with him. After all, most parents know the frustration of dealing with children who will not listen. But God holds him accountable: “Why do you honour your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?” (**v 29**). Eli has honoured his sons ahead of God. Indeed the implication of **verse 29** is that Eli has knowingly benefited from their crimes. He has fattened himself on the fat of the sacrifice. He may be a father who cannot change the heart of his sons; but he is also a high priest who could end the employment in the tabernacle of his sons. And he has not.

In 1:16 Eli accused Hannah of being a “wicked woman”, literally “a daughter of wickedness”. But in **2:12**, it is his own sons who are truly “sons of wickedness”. Perhaps the reason Eli mistook Hannah’s prayer for drunken behaviour was because drunkenness was all too common at Shiloh. Eli rebuked Hannah as a daughter of wickedness even though she was not; he refuses to rebuke his sons as sons of wickedness even though they are.

The Judgment of the Family

In her song, Hannah sang: “Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the LORD is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed” (**v 3**). The deeds of Eli’s house are about to be weighed and found wanting.

A man of God comes to Eli (**v 27**). He begins by describing what God has done for the house of Eli:

- *God revealed (v 27)*: God revealed himself to their ancestors. This

implies both that they knew how to live before God and that God had entered into a relationship with them.

- *God chose (v 28)*: God chose them to enjoy all the privileges of priesthood.
- *God gave (v 28)*: God gave them sufficient food.

But Eli's house has scorned the sacrifice (v 29). It literally means "kicked the sacrifices". A contemporary version might be: *I have done all this for you and in return you've kicked me in the face*. And so, God says: "Those who honour me I will honour, but those who despise me will be disdained" (v 30). "God cannot be mocked," says Paul in Galatians 6:7.

The **irony** is that Phinehas was named after one of his ancestors in the house of **Aaron**, yet he could not be more unlike his namesake. Numbers 25 describes how at Shittim, while Moses was leading the people in the wilderness, the nation of Moab hatched a plan to bring judgment on Israel. The women of Moab seduced the men of Israel and then invited them to share in their idolatrous worship. So God set a plague on the people and told Moses to execute the ringleaders. But even as the people were weeping for their sin, a man brought a Moabite woman into the camp. So the first Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, followed them into their tent and thrust a spear through both of them at once. At that moment, the plague stopped.

The name Phinehas, given to one of Eli's sons, recalls this story. But this Phinehas is the villain rather than the hero. The first Phinehas was zealous for God's honour and put an end to **fornication**. As a result God promised that the house of Aaron would be a lasting priesthood. The second Phinehas treats God with contempt (1 Samuel **2:17**) and initiates fornication. As a result, God promises to bring his branch of the house of Aaron to an end (v **30-33**).

Over the following years, the descendants of Eli die prematurely (22:9-23) and are finally removed from the priesthood by Solomon (1 Kings 2:26-27). The writer of 1 and 2 Kings specifically describes this as a fulfilment of God's

word to Eli (1 Kings 2:27). The sign that this will happen is that Hophni and Phinehas will die in the same day which, as we shall see, is what happens in 1 Samuel 4:11 and 18.

In her song, Hannah sang: “Those who were full hire themselves out for food” (2:5). Eli’s family are “full” (**2:12-17**). But they will hire themselves out for food: “Then everyone left in your family line will come and bow down before him for a piece of silver and a loaf of bread and plead, ‘Appoint me to some priestly office so that I can have food to eat’” (**v 36**). Their judgment for stealing “the bread of God” (**v 15**; Leviticus 21:21-22, ESV) is to be forced to beg for bread (1 Samuel **2:36**).

Hannah’s song left us asking: *How will Israel find a king?* The first answer is a negative one: not through the priesthood.

The Rise of Samuel

Interwoven throughout this story are little snippets about the rise of Samuel. At first sight, this might appear to be a sloppy use of sources, with a number of similar summary statements thrown in. An editor might have told the author to remove the unnecessary repetition! But in fact, there is a skilful movement between Samuel and Eli’s sons.

	2 v 11: Samuel ministers
2 v 12-17: Eli's house does not minister	2 v 18-21: Samuel ministers
2 v 22-25: Eli's house is criticised by the people	2 v 26: Samuel finds favour with the people

2 v 27-34: Eli's house will end	2 v 35-36: A new priest will serve for ever
	3 v 1: Samuel ministers

The whole section is sandwiched by two almost identical summary statements:

- **2:11**: “The boy ministered before the LORD under Eli the priest.”
- **3:1**: “The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli.”

The only difference is that in **3:1** Samuel is named and now Eli is no longer described as a priest. His priesthood is discredited and defunct.

Significant, too, is the way in which Samuel is described. Three times we are told he “ministers” before the LORD (**2:11, 18; 3:1**) and the verb “minister” is often used to describe the activity of priests. In **2:20**, Eli prays: “May the LORD give you children by this woman to take the place of the one she prayed for and gave to the LORD.” Hannah does indeed go on to have five further children (**v 21**). The implication of Eli’s prayer is that they are given by God in exchange for Samuel, who now belongs to the LORD. In **2:18** we are told he wears an **ephod**, which is what a priest does (**v 28**; see also 22:18).

Samuel was also portrayed as a Nazirite. Hannah vowed she would dedicate Samuel to the LORD, and her reference to him not taking a razor to his head suggests he was a Nazirite (1:11). According to Numbers 6, someone taking a Nazirite vow could not drink wine or eat grapes, nor cut their hair or touch the dead. In this, they resembled the high priest, who could not drink wine in the **sanctuary** or touch the dead (Leviticus 10:9-11; 21:1-3, 10-11). What the high priest could not do in the sanctuary, a Nazirite could not do anywhere. In other words, they treated the whole world as a holy place, a place dedicated to God. Put another way, they treated the whole of their time as holy and not just time spent in the sanctuary.

So Nazirites were, in a sense, a priesthood in the world and to the world. Their holy service took place outside the sanctuary in the world (often taking the form of holy war) while the priest's holy service took place inside the sanctuary. Samuel would embody God's call to Israel to be a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:5-6). He is like Christians under the new covenant: a kingdom of priests serving God in the world and treating all of life as holy.

Samuel was a Levite, but not from the house of Aaron. So he was qualified to serve in the temple, but not be a priest. But he is presented here in quasi-priest-like terms, as a replacement for the failing house of Eli. He would go on to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people (1 Samuel 7:9-10; 10:8; 16:2-3). The house of Eli are priests of Aaron, but they do not act like priests. Samuel is not a priest of Aaron, but he acts like a true priest.

A Priest For Ever

The rise of Samuel is a sign of the fall of Eli's house. But it is also a sign that God can raise up for himself a priest from outside the house of Aaron. And this is precisely what God promises through the man of God in **2:35**: "I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind. I will firmly establish his priestly house, and they will minister before my anointed one always."

There may be an immediate allusion to Zadok and his priestly house, who gain legitimacy under David and Solomon (2 Samuel 8:17; 1 Kings 1:7-8, 32-34; 2:26-27; 4:1-4). But ultimately it is an allusion to Jesus. Jesus is not from the house of Aaron. That priesthood was a failed priesthood (Hebrews 7:11). It could not save completely and it could not save eternally. Even the best of them had to keep repeating the sacrifices. So God promises a coming priest, Jesus.

Jesus is a better priest because he is an eternal priest (Hebrews 7:11-19, 23-25). His priesthood is founded on his resurrection: “the power of an indestructible life” (v 16). And Jesus is a better priest because he is appointed directly by the oath of God (v 20-22, 28). The result is that Jesus offers “a better hope” (v 19) and is “the guarantor of a better covenant” (v 22).

As Hebrews 7:26-27 puts it: “Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.”

Think of the contrast with the house of Eli. Jesus is holy, blameless, pure and set apart from sinners. He does not take from us, but “offered himself” for us.

In 1 Samuel **2:25**, Eli asks: “If one person sins against another, God may mediate for the offender; but if anyone sins against the LORD, who will intercede for them?” Who will intercede? If you have a secret sin that you cannot tell anyone about, which means you keep your distance from God, who will speak for you? Who will intercede? The answer comes ten verses later. Jesus will. God will raise up a faithful priest, who “is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (Hebrews 7:25).

What actual difference does having a priest for ever make to us? 1 John 2:1 says: “We have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One”. This truth comes at the end of three false claims that John has debunked:

- “If we claim to have fellowship with [God] and yet walk in the darkness...” (1:6)
- “If we claim to be without sin... (1:8)

- “If we claim we have not sinned...” (1:10)

By “walking in the darkness”, John means hiding our sin rather than bringing it into the light of God’s word. John exposes each of these false claims. If we hide our sin or deny our sin or minimise our sin, we lie, we deceive ourselves and we make God a liar. But the glorious promise is that we can bring our sin into the light *because we have a priest for ever*. “The blood of Jesus ... purifies us from all sin” (v 7). You and I have a priest standing in the presence of God, and through him we are cleansed and forgiven. We can know with certainty that “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (v 9). We confess with confidence and freedom because we have Jesus as our priest.

To hide or minimise or excuse your sin is to live in the dark. But your priest beckons you into the light. There is no need to hide and no need to fear exposure. Because we have a priest for ever, confession leads to forgiveness and freedom.

Questions for reflection

1. Are there any ways in which your religious activities are done for yourself, rather than for God?
2. How does thinking of Jesus as your high priest help you to appreciate more fully what he has done, and does, for you?
3. How do you need to ask Jesus to intercede for you today?

PART TWO

A Coming Prophet

The story of a coming priest in 1 Samuel **2:11 – 3:1** begins and ends in the same way: “The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli”. The next story begins and ends in starkly contrasting ways:

- “In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions” (**3:1**).
- “And Samuel’s word came to all Israel” (**4:1**).

We move from a wordless nation to the word reaching all Israel. Indeed, the writer closes the story with four summary statements. Any one of these would have made a fitting climax to the story. But to make sure we understand what is happening, we have four statements which together labour the point.

- “The LORD ... let none of Samuel’s words fall to the ground” (**3:19**).
- “And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognised that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD” (**3:20**).
- “The LORD ... revealed himself to Samuel through his word” (**3:21**).
- “And Samuel’s word came to all Israel” (**4:1**).

The Word of God is Rare

In **3:1**, the writer not only says that God's word was rare, but that "there were not many visions". Then immediately we are told Eli's "eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see" (**v 2**). Eli cannot see physically. But he cannot see spiritually either.

Verse 3 says: "The lamp of God had not yet gone out". At one level, this is simply a reference to the time of day. The lamp in the tabernacle was supposed to be lit throughout the night (Exodus 27:20-21; Leviticus 24:1-4). But the writer clearly intends it also to be symbolic. Eli's eyes are literally "dim" in 1 Samuel **3:2**. Now we have an image of a lamp almost going out. The light it casts is dim. But it is not yet extinguished. There is still hope.

God's word is rare and the light it brings is fading. Perhaps that is how you feel about your society or even your church today. 1 Samuel 3 tells us that we can have confidence in God's word. God will not leave himself silent.

The Word of God Comes

The sons of Eli "did not know the LORD" (**2:12**; ESV). In **3:7** we are told that "Samuel did not yet know the LORD". But their situation is very different. The sons of Eli have a moral problem that has blinded them to the knowledge of God. Samuel is waiting to be called by God. Whereas Eli is "lying down in his own place" (**v 2**, ESV), Samuel "was lying down in the temple of the LORD", the place where he ministers before the LORD and where God is present (**2:11, 18, 21; 3:1**). The writer also reminds us that this is the location of the **ark of God** (**v 3**). The ark contained the tablets of stone upon which the covenant was written. So it acted as a reminder to God and to the people of the covenant promises that bound them together. The scene is set. Samuel is in God's presence with a reminder of God's covenant.

Samuel hears what was presumably an audible voice calling him. “Here I am,” he responds (**v 4**). He assumes it is Eli calling him so he runs to Eli. “I did not call,” says Eli. “Go back and lie down” (**v 5**). The same thing happens a second time (**v 6**). The story is taking on an almost comic tone.

But when it happens a third time, Eli realises Samuel is not simply hearing the sounds of the night. Something significant is happening: “Eli realised that the LORD was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, ‘Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening”’” (**v 8-9**).

Samuel then encounters God for a fourth time. But this time it seems to be more than a voice. God *appears* to Samuel. “The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ Then Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening’” (**v 10**).

This time God repeats Samuel’s name: “Samuel! Samuel!”. It echoes God’s call to Moses. God called from the burning bush: “Moses! Moses!” And Moses replied as Samuel did on the first three times he was called: “Here I am” (Exodus 3:4). God is calling Samuel as he called Moses (and as Moses promised God would do in Deuteronomy 18:18).

This is God’s call to Samuel to be his prophet. As a result, Samuel is recognised as a prophet and begins his ministry of bringing God’s word to God’s people (**3:19-21**).

But this call also contains a specific word to Eli (**v 11-14**). God is about to do something that will make “the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle” (**v 11**). He will bring down the house of Eli (**v 12-13**), just as he warned through the “man of God” in chapter 2. Eli would not rebuke his sons, so Samuel must rebuke his (adopted) father (Eli calls him “my son” in **3:16**). God’s word to Samuel concludes: “The guilt of Eli’s house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering” (**v 14**). No wonder Samuel is reluctant to pass on the message (**v 15-18**).

Eli has shown contempt towards the sacrificial offerings. But there is no

other means of atonement. To reject God's sacrifice is to reject any hope of your guilt being atoned for. The sacrifices of the Old Testament point to the sacrifice of Jesus at the cross. So, in the same way, to treat the cross with contempt is to reject any hope of your guilt being atoned for. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it:

"If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (10:26-31)

It is not that there are sins which are beyond the scope of the cross. There are no sins which are too big for the grace of God in the blood of Christ to cover. The point is this: if you despise the cross of Christ, then you reject the only means of salvation. If you "kick" Christ's sacrifice, you have nowhere left to turn.

Next, "Samuel's word came to all Israel" (1 Samuel **4:1**). But there is actually no further reference to Samuel in the chapter. So **3:11-14** is Samuel's word, and chapter 4 is his word coming into effect with the deaths of Hophni, Phinehas and Eli. This is Samuel's word "coming to" the nation; the evidence that Samuel is God's prophet (**3:20**) as God acts to fulfil the word of his prophet (**v 21**).

The Word of God Comes Today

Israel was in desperate crisis. There was no rule, and the house of God was horribly compromised. What did God do? He sent his word. He raised up a prophet.

This is always how God acts to change the *status quo*. He sends his word. In the beginning, God created the universe through his word. He spoke to the darkness and there was light. He brought order from chaos and fulness from emptiness through his word. He created life through his word and ruled his people through his word. And he continues to rule history through his word. He still brings light through his word. He still brings life through his word. Just as he created through his word, so he recreates through his word.

So what do we most need in a crisis? God's word. And we need confidence in God's word.

In the crises of your life, you need God's word. God's word refreshes the soul, make us wise, restores joy to our hearts and gives light to our eyes (Psalm 19:7-8). We need to be reading the Bible, engaging with the preaching of our church, speaking the word to one another and reminding our own hearts of God's word. I remember pastoring a couple whose marriage was in crisis. The more we talked, the worse it got. The recrimination and disagreements seemed only to be amplified by talking it through. But when we prayed through God's word, their hearts became soft and they wept in repentance. What did they most need in their time of crisis? God to send his word.

And in the crisis of our culture, we need God's word. Our hope will not come through legislation to defend Christianity. It will not come through gimmicky methods or trendy services. We will never compete with Hollywood for entertainment. Our hope is in the power of God's word.

Today, there is no Samuel. We have a greater word-bringer. "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in

various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe” (Hebrews 1:1-2). Jesus is the prophet who has come to reveal God. In the past, says Hebrews, God spoke in the night to prophets like Samuel. Now “he has spoken to us by his Son”. Jesus is the word of God. And we see Jesus in the Scriptures: the Spirit-inspired promise of his coming (in the Old Testament) and the record of his coming (in the New Testament).

The point of this part of 1 Samuel is not that we should expect, and far less demand, that God will speak to us in the way he spoke to Samuel. Samuel was being called as a prophet like Moses. You and I are not in that category! No, the point is that God has spoken. And he has spoken to us in his Son and through his word. He has spoken and we should listen. He has spoken and we should pass on that word.

If God’s word is rare today, it is not because God is silent. God has spoken, loud and clear. If God’s word is rare today, it is because people will not listen and Christians will not speak. It is because God’s people have smoothed away what they do not like, or simply lost confidence that anyone will listen. Paul warned Timothy: “The time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather round them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths” (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

People have itching ears for anything but the truth. It is very tempting to turn to other things. But this is Paul’s exhortation to Timothy and to us: “But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry” (2 Timothy 4:5). Do not panic. Keep your head. Do not change course. Continue to evangelise. Continue even when it is hard. Do not provide what itching ears want to hear. Instead, speak the word of Christ—the word that can make ears tingle! In a crisis, God speaks. In a crisis, we must listen, and pass on what he says.

Questions for reflection

1. When, and why, are you tempted to lose confidence in the power of God's word?
2. Are there ways in which the word of God is rare because you will not speak? What will you do about this?
3. How do God's charge to Samuel, and Paul's charge to Timothy, both inspire and challenge you?

1 SAMUEL 4 VERSE 1 TO 7 VERSE 17

3. The Weight of Glory

Someone was telling me recently how their grandmother loves angels. Her home is full of pictures of angels. What is that all about? I think the answer is that you get all the comfort of a divine reality without any of the demands. It is a way of domesticating God. (The irony is that whenever angels appear in the Bible, people are terrified!)

Or have you ever thought why it is that, as our culture moves further away from Christianity, it still makes a big deal of Christmas? Again the answer is that it is a domesticated version of God. It is all about “the baby Jesus”. We can cope with the baby in the manger, but not the man on the cross or the Lord on his heavenly throne.

In the sixteenth century, William Tyndale was martyred because he translated the Bible into English. The Catholic church had created a series of rites and rituals of **penance, masses and indulgences** that controlled the grace of God. They had domesticated God. They made his demands manageable. Translating the Bible so everyone could read it threatened this system.

What about you? How do you domesticate God? One answer for me is that I take my standards from other Christians. What I do with my money or time, where I live and what I say is shaped by what other people do rather than by God’s word. I interpret God’s will through a filter of what seems “reasonable”. I domesticate God. I take God lightly.

Have you ever noticed how we use the word “light” to mean “not serious”? “Keeping it light” means not being too serious. Or we talk about taking

something “lightly” or being “light-hearted”.

Just as “light” means “not serious”, the idea of “weighty” implies that something is serious. We talk about weighty ideas, a heavy heart, heavy losses, a heavy blow, the gravity of the situation.

The same link is made in the Bible. In Hebrew the word “glory” (*kabod*) comes from the same root as the word “weighty” (*kebed*). The glory of God is his weight, his substance, his gravity. God’s glory is his weightiness. Of course, God does not have a body, so it is not literal weight. His glory is the seriousness with which he must be taken.

What does the weight of God’s glory mean?

You Cannot Use God

In 1 Samuel **4:1**, the Israelites go out to fight against the Philistines. The Philistines were a nation descended from the Egyptians (Genesis 10:14; 1 Chronicles 1:12). At this point in their history, they had settled on the coastal strip of Palestine, in five city-states. In so doing they had become the main threat to Israel.

The story does not start well. Israel take God lightly. In 1 Samuel **4:1-2**, Israel go into battle without God... and lose. This seems to confuse them. “Why did the LORD bring defeat on us today before the Philistines?” they ask (**v 3**). Their response is to bring “the ark of the LORD’s covenant” (**v 3-4**).

The ark was an ornamented box containing the two tablets of stone that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. When I make a contract with a publisher to write a book, we sign two copies. I get one to keep and they get one to keep so we can hold each other to the contract. It was the same in the ancient middle east. If you made a covenant or treaty, you each had a

record in stone, which you kept in the temple of your god. So the two tablets of stone that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai are God's copy and Israel's copy of the covenant God has made with his people. And they both keep a copy in their temple—which, in this case, is the same place, the tabernacle. So the ark is a reminder to each of their covenant obligations. The ark also contained a sample of manna, the bread from heaven that God had miraculously provided for his people when they wandered in the wilderness (Exodus 16). So the ark is also a reminder of God's provision in the past.

Above all, the ark was a symbol of God's presence. The ark drops out of the story of Israel after it has been placed in the temple. The ark was in effect the portable symbol of God's presence among his people. It then gave way to the temple, which was the permanent symbol of God's presence among his people.

The ark was supposed to remain in the tabernacle. But the Israelites bring it onto the battlefield. They think that if they put this symbol of God's presence among them, then they will win the battle. When the ark arrives in the Israelite camp, "all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook" (1 Samuel 4:5). They are trying to use God, to force him to act on their behalf. They are not taking God seriously. They think they can simply co-opt him for their own purposes.

The irony is that the Philistines do take God seriously. They hear the shout and discover what is happening. The result is they are afraid (v 6-7). They have a better **theology** than God's people. They remember the story of the exodus. "We're doomed! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness" (v 8). They know they will need to fight harder than ever before (v 9). There are two references to the exodus in this story—and they both come from the Philistines (4:8; 6:6). They remember. I am sure the Israelites could tell you the stories if you asked. But they do not live in the light of the story. The Philistines do; and so they are afraid. They remember what God can do. They know God is weighty.

In 1 Samuel **4:1-2** Israel went into battle without God and lost. In **verses 10-11** Israel go into battle with God... and still lose. They lose because they are seeking to use God; and God cannot be used by us.

It is possible for us to treat God like a waiter in a restaurant. You sit with your friends, enjoying a meal, talking together, and most of the time you ignore the waiter. Then when you want something you call him over. "Can we order dessert now?" "Can you bring some more water?" "Can we have the bill?" The waiter does not sit at the table with you. He is not part of your evening. You just call him over when you need him. We can treat God like that. He is not part of our lives. But when we need him, we call him over to help. We do not take him seriously.

It is not hard to end up seeing God in this un-weighty way; to think, perhaps unconsciously, that by coming to church each Sunday, reading the Bible each day and giving a portion of our income, we are doing our bit for God. And in return we expect God to save us from hell and help out from time to time in life, ensuring that we are comfortable or happy or whatever it is that we wish to use him to supply.

But God is not there for us. We are here for him. We were made in his image; we are not to make him in ours. The world does not revolve around you. Your world does not revolve around you. God must be at the centre. God's glory must be central to your life. We need to recognise the weight of glory. We need to take God seriously.

You Cannot Rob God of His Glory

The news of the defeat and the death of his sons comes to Eli (**v 12-17**). And it kills him: "When [the messenger] mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell backwards off his chair by the side of the gate. His neck was broken and he

died, for he was an old man, and he was heavy. He had led Israel for forty years” (v 18). His pregnant daughter-in-law hears the news and goes into labour (v 19-20). She dies in childbirth, but not before she has named her child. This defeat is memorialised in a name, “Ichabod”, meaning “Where is glory?” Her reasoning is: “The Glory has departed from Israel” (v 21-22).

The question asked each time this child is called by his name will be: *Where is the glory?* The answer is: *The glory has departed.*

Where is the glory? In one sense, it has been stolen by Eli’s family. Israel’s defeat is a judgment against the corruption of Eli’s family. His sons have abused the sacrifices and slept with women in the tabernacle, and Eli has not stopped them. As God warned back in 2:30, those who have despised God are now being disdained by him. The priests have not honoured God. They have stolen his glory. And this is what has happened to them. Make no mistake; we need to take God seriously.

Where is the glory? In a very real sense, it is round the waist of Eli. **4:18** says: “And he was heavy”. The writer does not need to tell us this. The story works without it. But the writer draws our attention to the weight of Eli. Remember weight and glory have the same root. Where is the glory or the weight? It is around Eli’s waist.

In 2:29, God said to Eli: “Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for my dwelling? Why do you honour your sons more than me *by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering* made by my people Israel?” When people offered an animal sacrifice, the fat should have been burned off. Then the priests could eat the cooked meat. The fat belonged to God, and the meat belonged to the priests. But Eli’s sons wanted a juicy roast so they took the meat before the fat had been burnt off. Eli’s family has fattened themselves on the fat that belonged to God.

Why does Eli die? In part because he hears tragic news. But he also dies because he is too heavy to sit on a chair. He has stolen God’s glory, his weight, and quite literally put it on his waist. Hannah sang of how the LORD

“weighs” our deeds (2:3). Ironically, the weighty Eli has deeds that do not carry weight in comparison with the weight of God’s glory.

What do we owe God? “In view of God’s mercy ... offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Romans 12:1). The sacrifice that belongs to God is our whole lives. How do we rob God of his glory? By not giving him the worship of our lives. Or by taking credit for what God has done. Or by serving him externally, but it being all for our own sake; to be noticed, to feel great, to pat ourselves on the back. We need to recognise the weight of glory. We need to take God seriously.

You Cannot have Rival Affections

Where is the glory? In 1 Samuel **4:22**, the wife of Phinehas says: “The Glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured”. The glory of God represented by the ark of God is in the Philistine city of Ashdod (**5:1**).

What happens there? “The LORD’s hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod and its vicinity; he brought devastation on them and afflicted them with tumours” (**v 6**). God’s hand was heavy on them. The weight of God’s glory weighed down on them.

The Philistines put the ark in the temple of the Philistine god, Dagon (**v 2**). This is meant to be a sign of Dagon’s superiority over the God of Israel. But in the morning, they find the statue of Dagon prostrate before the ark of God (**v 3**). So they prop up their god. The following morning the same thing has happened again—only this time Dagon has been decapitated! The statue’s head and hands have broken off (**v 4**). The Philistine religious establishment never forgot it (**v 5**).

Before God all other gods must fall. Only **Yahweh**, the God of Israel, has

weight. Only God has substance. All other gods have to be propped up. What are your gods? What rivals God for your heart? Are you taking the weight of God's glory seriously? Before him all other gods must fall. Don't worship them. Worship the one and only God of glory.

Questions for reflection

1. How seriously are you taking God?
2. “God is not there for us. We are here for him.” When is it easiest to forget this humbling truth?
3. How does the episode in Dagon’s temple encourage you to keep following and worshipping the God of the Bible?

PART TWO

Who Can Stand?

The people of Ashdod decide to send the ark to the Philistine city of Gath (**5:7-8**). Perhaps Gath can cope with the weightiness of God's glory? But there, too, God sends tumours (**v 9**). So they send the ark to the Philistine city of Ekron (**v 10**). The same thing happens again. They, too, want to send the ark away "for death has filled the city with panic; God's hand was very heavy on it" (**v 11**). No one remains unaffected (**v 12**). God's glory is crushing them under its weight.

Finally, after seven months, the Philistines decide to send the ark back to Israel with a "guilt offering" of five golden tumours and five golden mice—one for each of the cities of Philistia (**6:1-6, 17-18**—the word "tumour" also means "fortified city"). The Philistines may have been affected by bubonic plague, which causes swelling of the lymph nodes and is spread by rats. This may explain why they return the ark with golden tumours and mice. The Philistines provide a guilt offering to lift the heavy hand of God (**v 3**). They cannot live with the glory of God.

But just to make sure it is not all a coincidence, they put the ark on two calving cows. Every instinct in these cows should be towards their calves. But instead they head towards Israel, taking the ark home (**v 7-12**).

And they all lived happily ever after.

At least, that is what you might expect. The ark is home again among God's people, and all is well. The Philistine rulers watch the progress of the ark,

and when they see it has arrived safely back in Israel, they go home (**v 13-16**). All is well. The heavy weight of God's glory has lifted from Philistia and the ark is safely home.

But this is not the end, and the next episode is not a happy one. "God struck down some of the inhabitants of Beth Shemesh, putting seventy of them to death because they had looked into the ark of the LORD. The people mourned because of the heavy blow the LORD had dealt them. And the people of Beth Shemesh asked, "'Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God? To whom will the ark go up from here?'" (**v 19-20**).

This is not incidental to the story. The narrative of chapters 4 – 7 is organised in a chiasmic structure, a common Hebrew way of organising a story in matching pairs that are layered like an onion.

- a. A battle at Ebenezer is won by the Philistines (**4:1-11**)
- b. The ark is held by Gentiles in Philistia (**4:12-22**)
- c. The ark plagues Philistia (**5:1-12**)
- d. The ark returns (**6:1-18**)
- c'. The ark plagues Beth Shemesh (**6:19-21**)
- b'. The ark is held by Gentiles in Kiriath Jearim (**7:1-2**)
- a'. A battle at Ebenezer is won by the Israelites (**7:3-17**)

In a chiasmic structure, the most important thing is often at the centre; and at the centre of this story is the return of the ark. God deals a "heavy blow" on the people of Beth Shemesh (**6:19**). All is not well. The weight of God's glory now presses down on his own people. The ark was dangerous for the Philistines—but it is just as dangerous for the Israelites.

Why? The people of Beth Shemesh do three things wrong. First, they sacrifice cows when they should have sacrificed bulls (Leviticus 1:3). Second, they parade the ark, placing it on a large rock for all to see, when they

should have covered it (Numbers 4:5). Finally—and decisively—they look inside the ark.

This is the key moment in the story. Dagon falling down before Yahweh is hilarious; we naturally delight in the humour of the episode. But this incident takes us by surprise. It shocks and sobers us; or at least, it should do. We cannot take God lightly. To have God among us is a weighty matter. God is dangerous. It is as if his holiness is nuclear.

There is an unavoidable weight of glory that demands to be taken seriously. At the beginning of the story, we think the Philistines are the threat to Israel. But it turns out that God himself is just as much of a threat.

This episode marks the end of the shrine at Shiloh—because God himself brings destruction on his tabernacle at Shiloh. This is the place of sacrifice, the place where the priests ministered, the place where God was present. Samuel grew up in the presence of God because he grew up in Shiloh (1 Samuel 2:21). But now God himself desecrates Shiloh through the Philistines. Why? Because Israel has already desecrated it through the actions of the sons of Eli (2:12-17). Centuries later, **Jeremiah** would warn the people to learn the lesson of Shiloh: “Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel” (Jeremiah 7:12; see also 26:1-6). What is the lesson of Shiloh? We cannot take God lightly.

The people of Beth Shemesh pose this question: “Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God?” (1 Samuel **6:20**). The ark of God’s presence cannot be borne by the Philistines or by Israel. *Where can it safely stay?* is their question. And it is the question the whole story poses to us. When the weight of God’s glory presses down on you, who can stand? Not Dagon—before the ark of the LORD, he required propping up, and then was decapitated. But now it seems that God’s people cannot stand before him either.

The people of Beth Shemesh cope with the ark in the way the Philistines

did. They send it to another town (6:21 – 7:2a). It would be humorous if it were not so serious.

Thankfully, there is a better answer, and it comes with the reintroduction of Samuel. Samuel is not mentioned in chapters 4 – 6. He is introduced to Israel in chapter 3 as the one who brings God's word. And only when Samuel leads Israel is there hope (7:3).

How to Stand in the Presence of God

The people turn back to God (7:2). But Samuel says that if this is genuine repentance, then they should get rid of their foreign gods (v 3). The people confess their sin, but they also take action. They put away their **Baals and Ashtoreths**. They "[serve] the LORD only" (v 4). This is true repentance. It is not just words (6:6). It is actions. The people flee temptation. If you are truly repentant, then you will do all that you can to avoid sin.

I have often seen people express sorrow for sin. But then they refuse to do what they need to do to avoid it. They say: *I'll be alright* or *It won't happen again* or *I've got it under control* or *It's not too serious*. The reality is that they are sorry about the effects of sin, but still want to hold onto the sin itself. They need to feel the weight of God's glory. The people of Beth Shemesh look into the ark and 70 of them die! Flee temptation. Run from sin. Do whatever you can. In her song Hannah says: "By him deeds are weighed" (2:3). Your deeds are weighed and the measure by which they are weighed is the weight of God's glory.

True repentance leads to action. But worship is important too. Samuel leads the people in a corporate act of worship (7:5-6). The pouring of water has no precedent in the Old Testament. Maybe they made it up. Perhaps it was related to the fasting: they were denying themselves food and drink,

and symbolically enacted this by pouring out water on the ground before God. The point is this: repentance is not just about turning from sin. That can make it about my attempt to be good enough for God. True repentance is a movement away from sin *and back to God*. The assembling, the fasting, the confession and the pouring of water make their repentance God-ward in its focus.

People who take God's glory seriously repent. And people who take God's glory seriously are able to stand in his presence, because God takes his own glory seriously through sacrifice.

The proper response to the threat of God's glory is sacrifice (**v 7-9**). The sacrifice of an animal was a picture. What does it symbolise? There is a clue in the story. Deuteronomy 28:64-68 says the ultimate curse of covenant unfaithfulness is exile. But who is exiled in this story? God! The words: "The Glory has departed" in 1 Samuel **4:21-22** are literally: "The Glory has gone into exile". Psalm 78 recalls this story and describes the ark as going into "captivity" (Psalm 78:61). The people deserve the judgment of exile. But instead it is God himself who is exiled. He bears their judgment.

It is a pointer to the cross. The sacrifice of an animal is the symbol. The cross is the reality. At the cross God himself, in the person of his Son, experienced judgment. He experienced the judgment of exile. He was cut off from God his Father. He took the judgment of exile on himself so that we can be welcomed home.

Who can stand? Only those whose sin has been judged through sacrifice; only those with a substitute who has taken their judgment. Romans 3:23 says: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". This is what sin is—falling short of God's glory. It is not taking God seriously, robbing him of his glory, glorifying ourselves as we worship other gods. God takes this seriously—so seriously that he can only forgive us through sacrifice. We are only "justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood" (3:24-25b).

God takes his glory so seriously that he himself takes the weight of glory on himself. Jesus comes as our representative and our substitute. The weight of God's glory pressed down on Jesus and crushed the life out of him. He died in my place.

In these chapters of 1 Samuel, the defeat of God proves to be the means of victory. The ark of God is taken to the temple of Dagon as a trophy of victory and tribute to Dagon's superiority. But in the morning, Dagon lies fallen before God. The defeat of God leads to his victory over the Philistines.

It is the same at the cross. The dead body of Jesus was Satan's trophy of victory. But through Christ's death the power of Satan was broken. Satan's triumph became his ultimate defeat. Jesus walked victorious from the tomb and we walk out with him. In her song Hannah sang: "[The LORD] raises the poor from the dust ... and makes them inherit a throne of honour" (2:8). It is literally "a throne of glory" or "a throne of weight". What happened to Hannah in chapter 1 is what happened to Israel in chapter 7; and it is what happens to us at the cross. We are lifted from shame to glory.

"Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God?" (6:20) Romans 5:1-2 answers: "We have been justified through faith, [so] we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God." Through the cross, the glory of God ceases to be our fear and becomes our hope. The word "boast" can be translated "glory". We glory in glory.

This section of 1 Samuel began with a battle between Israel and the Philistines; and it ends with one. Back in 4:5-7, the Philistines heard and were afraid. Now in 7:7, it is the Israelites who hear and are afraid. But as the Philistines attack, the LORD thunders from heaven. The Philistines are thrown into such a panic that they are routed (v 10-11). In 2:9-10 Hannah promised that God would thunder against those who opposed him (see also 2 Samuel 22:14). This is exactly what happens in 1 Samuel 7: God thunders from heaven to judge the nations and deliver his people. The result is peace

(v 13-14). While Samuel is sacrificing, God wins the victory. This is victory through sacrifice.

Raise Our Ebenezer

The **narrative arc** moves from tyranny (4:1-2) to peace (7:14). Both ends of this arc are memorialised in a name. The exile of God was memorialised in the name “Ichabod” (4:21). Now the victory of God is memorialised in another name, “Ebenezer” (7:12). “Ebenezer” was the site of Israel’s defeat in 4:1-11. Now it becomes the site of victory. “Ichabod” was so named because: “The Glory has departed from Israel”. In contrast “Ebenezer” means “stone of help” and the explanation is: “Thus far the LORD has helped us”. This functions as a promise of God’s future deliverance, if Israel repent of their idolatry and put their faith in sacrifice.

The hymn *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing* by Robert Robinson (1735-1790) contains the lines:

*Here I raise my Ebenezer;
Here by thy great help I’ve come;
And I hope, by thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.*

We do not always sing these lines because most people do not know the origin of the meaning of “Ebenezer”. But this is where it comes from.

For Christians our Ebenezer is the cross. At the cross, we see the seriousness of sin, the weight of glory, and God’s generous help to sinners. We raise up the cross and say: “Thus far the LORD has helped us”. And if he has helped us by giving his own Son, then surely he will bring us safely home to glory: “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32).

When you feel overwhelmed by your problems, or when you feel God has abandoned you, or when you feel threatened by the circumstances of your life, look to the cross. The cross is our Ebenezer, the great declaration of God's help. The way we truly take the glory of God seriously is by raising up the cross.

Questions for reflection

1. Reflect on your past week. Have you been genuinely repenting of sin?
2. You can stand before the glory of God because of the cross. How does knowing that make you feel?
3. Are you feeling lost, despairing, threatened or abandoned? How will the cross be your Ebenezer in that area of life?

1 SAMUEL 7 VERSE 15 TO 9 VERSE 27

4. A King like the Nations

Samuel is the last of the judges to judge Israel (7:5, **15-17**). The story of the judges is told as a series of repeated cycles: sin is followed by judgment, judgment is followed by repentance, repentance is followed by deliverance, and deliverance is followed by a period of peace. God raises up a judge to deliver his people and rule over them in peace. The judge would lead (or judge) Israel, bringing peace throughout his lifetime. But when the judge dies, the people return to their sin. And so the cycle begins again. The book of Judges outlines this pattern in Judges 2:10-19, and this then becomes the framework for the rest of the narrative.

The story of 1 Samuel 4 – 7 fits this pattern of the book of Judges. Sin leads to judgment in chapters 4 – 6. Then the people repent, and so God raises up Samuel as judge. “Samuel,” we are told in 7:6, “was serving as leader of Israel at Mizpah”. The word “leader” is the word translated “judge” in the book of Judges. Samuel the judge then delivers Israel, and as a result they enjoy a peace throughout his lifetime (1 Samuel 7:13-14). Then “Samuel continued as judge over Israel all the days of his life” (**v 15**, NIV1984).

But **8:1** introduces a break in the pattern: Samuel appoints his sons as judges. He introduces **hereditary** leadership. The only time previously that a son of a judge set himself up as leader, it ended in disaster. Abimelek, Gideon’s bastard son, had himself appointed king and it led to civil war (Judges 8:28-9:57). Yet now Samuel himself is responsible for appointing his sons (1 Samuel **8:1-2**).

“But his sons did not follow his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice” (**v 3**). The taking of bribes

was clearly forbidden in Deuteronomy 16:18-19. The story of Eli is being repeated. Eli had two **dissolute** sons and so Israel is instead ruled by Eli's adopted son. Now Samuel's sons are dissolute.

The people don't like what is happening. Coming to Samuel (1 Samuel **8:4**), they explain their concerns: "You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways" (**v 5**). Instead, they ask: "Appoint a king to lead us".

We are expecting the LORD to initiate the introduction of a king, but instead it comes as a request from the leaders. A king is anticipated in earlier texts (Genesis 17:6, 16; 35:11; 49:10; Numbers 24:7, 17-19; Deuteronomy 17:14-20). Now, it appears, is the time for that anticipation to become a reality.

Yet both God and Samuel greet the request for a king with disapproval (1 Samuel **8:6, 8**; 10:17-19; 12:17). Samuel takes it personally. But God says: "They have rejected *me*" (**8:7**). So, as God tells him to (**v 9**), Samuel warns the people what a king will be like (**v 10-18**). Yet still they want a king. "'No!' they said. 'We want a king over us. Then we shall be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles'" (**v 19-20**). So, when Samuel reports this back to God (**v 21**), he gives them what they want: "a king" (**v 22**). He has warned them; now he allows them to reject him.

This is strange. God has promised his people a king. The book of Judges has pointed out the people's need for a king (Judges 17:6; 21:25). Now the people ask for a king... and God sees it as a personal rejection, and (through Samuel) warns that a king will not be good for them. Why? Because the people are asking for the wrong king, with wrong motives.

Identity Rejected

Notice why the people ask for a king: “You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have” (1 Samuel **8:5**). There is a lack of logic in this request. They want to solve the problem of failed hereditary leadership by installing... hereditary **monarchical** leadership!

But the real issue is deeper and more serious than illogical thinking. The people are not asking for the king whom God has promised. They are asking for a king “such as all the other nations have”. When Samuel describes what such a king “will claim as his rights” (**v 9-18**), the people insistently repeat their demand for: “a king over us. Then we shall be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles” (**v 19-20**).

Why do they want a king as all the other nations have? Because they want Israel to be a nation “like all the other nations”. In essence, they no longer want to be Israel.

The repeated refrain of the Law of the Moses was: “Be holy, because I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44, 45; 19:2). We tend to use “holy” to mean morally pure; and that is right, because one of the key features of who God is is his moral purity. But it is also **reductive**. Originally the word “holy” meant “distinct” or “set apart” or, we might say, “unlike”. Israel was called to be “unlike” the nations, because they were called to be “like” God. But now they want to be “like” the nations.

Israel were the people of God. At the heart of their covenant with God was the promise: “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God” (Exodus 6:7; Jeremiah 31:33). They were a special people with a special relationship with God. They were a holy nation, set apart for God. They were called to be a light to the other nations. In other words, they had a **missional** identity: they were to be like God so they would reveal God to the nations.

Now they want to be just “like all the other nations” (1 Samuel **8:20**). It is a complete overturning of who they are.

- They were supposed to be a nation whose behaviour was governed by God's ruling-word. But instead, their behaviour is governed by what other people do.
- They were supposed to be different, distinct and holy. But instead they want to be the same, to conform, to fit in.
- They were supposed to be a light to the nations, revealing the rightness of God's rule. But instead of the nations learning from Israel, Israel learns from the nations.

Their request for a king like all the other nations is not only a rejection of logic. It is a rejection of identity.

Church: Just Like All the Others?

The church today is called to this distinctive missional identity. Peter uses the language of Israel's identity to describe the identity of the church: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). Peter says that the church are the inheritors of Israel's status as God's special people. We are his holy nation:

- We, like them, are to be a people whose behaviour is governed by God's ruling word. Are we?
- We, like them, are to be different, distinct and holy. Are we?
- We, like them, are supposed to be a light to the nations, declaring the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. Are we?

It is worth reflecting on how the church today finds it very easy to allow or

even desire our behaviour to be governed, our identity to be shaped and our message to be dictated by the nations or cultures around us, rather than by our God. We may not want a *king* in order to be like all the others. But we do want to be like them. It is attractive, it is popular, and it is more comfortable. It is also a rejection of our identity and our calling.

True King Rejected

The people of Israel want a king to fight their battles. The name “Saul”, who (as we’ll see) turns out to be the king they are asking for, is related to the verb “to ask”. Saul is the king the people “asked for”. But the name “Samuel” is also a pun on the verb “to ask” (1 Samuel 1:20). So the people already have a leader who was “asked for”: Samuel.

But in fact, as God points out, it is not Samuel whom they are rejecting. “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king” (8:7).

The events of chapter 8 take place many years after the events of chapters 4 – 7; long enough for Samuel to have grown old and have two adult sons. Yet these chapters are placed together to highlight the irony of the people’s request. In chapters 4 – 7 we see that the LORD is independently capable of defeating Israel’s enemies. He does not only lead his people to victory; he gives his people victory.

Even Samuel drops out of the story in chapters 4 – 6. Although military victories without human agency recur in 2 Kings 6:24 – 7:20 and 18:13 – 19:37, they have no precedent at this point in the story. The people have a king to fight for them: the LORD. Now they are trading him for a human king, just as everyone else has.

Before we condemn the Israelites, we need to remember the historical

background. Israel is a loose confederation of tribes. Sometimes they come together to fight a common enemy, led by a “judge”. Almost as often, they fight among themselves. There is no standing army and no central state structures. They are united by adherence to God’s covenant, embodied in their common worship, but that adherence is flimsy and the central shrine at Shiloh is a national disgrace. Then up pop the Philistines—a well-organised, aggressive state.

In this context “a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles” (1 Samuel **8:20**) perhaps sounds eminently sensible. But the reality is that this request amounts to a rejection of God’s rule. It reflects a failure to trust his power to save his people. God has rescued Israel from the Philistines in a remarkable way (7:10-11) and given them peace (7:13-14). But it is not enough for the people. They do not trust God. They want a king they can see. They want to live by sight. They want a human king they can see instead of a divine King whom they cannot see. Living by faith is too difficult.

But, as God reminds Samuel, this is nothing new. God says to Samuel: “As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you” (**8:8**). From the Garden of Eden onwards, humanity has rejected God’s rule. We would rather have a king who will take from us than the divine King who gives to us. It foreshadows the cry, as God’s Son stands in front of the people he made: “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15). The day is coming when the descendants of the men demanding a king of Samuel will choose not just a king *like* the nations, but a king *of* the nations, rather than acknowledge God’s Son as their King.

It typifies humanity. We reject God as King even though it means choosing tyranny. We believe Satan’s lie that God is a tyrant. We believe we will be more free without God. But we end up enslaved.

So we need to ask ourselves: *How do I look to what I can see rather than trusting in God?* You may look to a particular individual. You may think you

need their intervention to rescue you. You may look for their approval to feel good about yourself. You may think a spouse will complete you.

Or it may not be an individual. You may be trying to find identity in your career or secure your future in your investments. But in each case, your hope is what you can see. And that is not the way God's people are to live. Christians, Peter says, live for and love what we cannot see, the One who can save. "Though you have not seen [Jesus Christ], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 1:8-9).

Questions for reflection

1. Reflect on the three questions on page 62. How do they challenge you and your church?
2. When is it hardest to live by faith, rather than by sight?
3. How can knowing the identity that God has given his people motivate you to live distinctively, under his rule?

PART TWO

No Give, All Take

The people are asking for “a king to judge us” (1 Samuel **8:5**, ESV). “Judge” is the same word as the description of Samuel’s sons (see v 1). The king will replace Samuel’s sons as the judge or leader of Israel. But the writer intends us to hear this as a punning indictment. Israel asks for a king to judge them; and the king will indeed judge them, in the sense that the king himself will be a judgment on Israel.

In **verses 9 and 11**, God tells Samuel to “show them the ways” of the king (ESV) or let them know “what the king ... will claim as his rights” (NIV). The word translated “the ways” or “claim as his rights” can mean “custom”, but normally means “justice”. This will be the justice of the king. And what is the justice of their coming king? It is summed up in the word “take”. Samuel’s sons “took” bribes (**v 3**, ESV). Now four times Samuel uses the same word to warn that the king will “take”. He will take:

- their sons as soldiers (**v 11-12**)
- their daughters as servants (**v 13**)
- their best fields as gifts for his courtiers (**v 14**)
- their servants, cattle and donkeys for his own use (**v 16**)

In addition, in **verses 15-17** Samuel warns that the king will “take a tenth” of their harvest and their flocks. In other words, he will take a proportion of their income in taxation. The king will “take”, “take”, “take”, “take”, “take” and “take”. The net result is that “you yourselves will become his slaves” (**v**

17). Instead of serving the LORD, they will become slaves to a king. They will, in effect, be back in Egypt.

Back in Judges 8, the judge Gideon was offered the crown after his defeat of the Midianites. But Gideon refused the crown in stark terms: either Gideon would rule or God would rule (Judges 8:23). Yet Gideon named one of his sons “Abimelek”, which means “son of a king”. And when Abimelek proclaims himself king, the consequences are disastrous (Judges 8:31; 9:1-57).

Yet the writer of Judges suggests that the moral chaos in Israel was because they had no king (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). God has promised a king. Moses had predicted a king. The writer of Judges sees the need for a king. But they envisage a very different king from the one for whom the people ask. The people ask for a king like those of the nations. God envisages a king who will rule under him. Deuteronomy 17:14-16 warns against, and anticipates, the request for a king like those of the nations. Moses then describes how a king in Israel should function (v 17). Perhaps the key thing is that every king must begin his reign by writing out his own copy of the law. He is then to rule under God through obedience to God’s covenant word (v 18-20). The king must be subject to the prophetic word (2 Samuel 7:1-17; 12:1-14; 24:11-25). This is the criterion by which the kings of Israel will be judged.

And this is not the sort of king for which people ask. They ask for a king like those of the nations. And such a king will take, take, take. In contrast, God’s ultimate King, when he comes, will say: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). The true King “did not come to be served, but ... to give”.

At the trial of Jesus, Pilate asks him whether he is the king of the Jews (John 18:33). Jesus replies: “My kingdom is not of this world” (v 36). In other words, he is not a king “like the nations have”. If we want a leader of the sort everyone else looks for, Jesus will disappoint. If we learn to yearn for a ruler who obeys God and leads us into obedience to God (and, indeed, gives

us his obedience when and where we fail), then we will love having Jesus as our King.

The King's Anointing

Despite the ominous note regarding kingship in 1 Samuel 8, in chapters 9 – 11 the man destined to be that king, Saul, is presented in a positive light. Unlike Eli's and Samuel's sons, he listens to his father and is obedient. His father asks Saul to look for some missing donkeys and Saul obeys (**9:3-4**). Moreover, he listens to his new father-figure, Samuel. He is a fine-looking man (**v 2**), he is humble (**v 21**), he does not grasp at power (10:20-21), and he is generous to opponents (11:12-13).

Saul becomes king in four stages:

1. A secret anointing by Samuel (**9:1 – 10:1**)
2. A personal confirmation by signs (10:2-16)
3. A public selection by lot (10:17-27)
4. A victorious confirmation by the people (11:1-15)

Chapter 8 ends with the LORD telling Samuel to “give them a king” (**8:22**). Samuel sends everyone home. And so we are left, waiting for a king to emerge. So when chapter 9 begins as it does, we know what is coming: “There was a Benjaminite, a man of standing, whose name was Kish son of Abiel, the son of Zeror, the son of Bekorath, the son of Aphiah of Benjamin. Kish had a son named Saul, as handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel, and he was a head taller than anyone else” (**9:1-2**). Saul is going to be king.

But, true to form, the writer of Samuel first takes us off in an unexpected

direction. Far from conducting himself in a kingly manner, Saul is searching for lost donkeys (**v 3**), without success (**v 4-5**). So his servant suggests they consult Samuel (**v 6-10**). As it happens, they can only find Samuel with the help of some young women (**v 11-13**) and they do not recognise him when they meet him (**v 14-19**). Saul and his servant seek out Samuel so he can “tell” (*nagad*) them the whereabouts of their donkeys (**v 6, 8, 18**). But instead, Samuel is going to “tell” (*nagad*, **v 19**) that Saul will be the **king-designate** (*nagid*, **v 16**).

But first, Samuel invites Saul to eat with him (**v 19**), and reassures him about the lost donkeys (**v 20**). The writer describes in some detail Saul’s participation in this feast (**v 22-24**). It is not integral to the flow of the story—so why is it included? It has echoes backwards and forwards in the Bible story. 1 Samuel 9 recalls the marriage of Isaac. In Genesis 24, Abraham gives his servant the task of finding a wife for Isaac among his own people. The servant meets a woman at a well who turns out to be Rebekah, and she agrees to come back to be Isaac’s wife. But first the servant must feast in her family’s home.

Now Saul meets some women at a well who direct him to a feast (1 Samuel **9:11-13**). Saul goes to a quasi-marriage feast. So far this parallels the story of Abraham’s servant. But Saul does not marry any of the women at the well. Later on in the story in 2 Samuel 5:1, when the tribes of Israel confirm David as their king, they say: “We are your own flesh and blood”. “Flesh and blood” is a good contemporary **idiom** that captures what the people are saying—but what they literally say is: “We are your bone and flesh” (ESV). It echoes Adam’s cry when he first sees Eve: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23). It suggests that in acclaiming David as king, the people are acclaiming him as the husband of Israel. The king of Israel is a husband, and God’s people are his bride—just as one day Jesus will be the husband of his bride, the church. Taken together, these echoes suggest that the feast is a celebration of Saul’s appointment as the royal husband of God’s people. Saul will prove to be a poor husband of God’s people. But Jesus, the ultimate King of God’s people, is the husband who

gave his life in love for his bride (Ephesians 5:25-27). The detail of the feast matters!

The meal, of course, is not a literal wedding feast, but the culmination of a peace offering (1 Samuel **9:13**). According to Leviticus, the participants of a peace offering ate the meat after it was offered to God. Just as meals today are often acts of community, so this meal was an enactment of the peace secured through the sacrifice. According to Leviticus 7:33-34, the leg of a peace offering belonged to the priest. Perhaps Saul is going to be like a priest, serving the house of the LORD. But the house of the LORD that he will serve is not the building (the tabernacle), but the people. Priests were anointed with oil—and Saul is about to join them as an anointed one.

The King's Ascension

In 1 Samuel **9:25** – 10:1, Samuel anoints Saul and says: “Has not the LORD anointed you ruler over his inheritance?” (10:1). Samuel is concerned to ensure this is a secret anointing, so he sends his servants on ahead (**9:27**). Saul, too, is concerned to preserve this secrecy. In 10:13-16 his uncle presses him for information about his time with Samuel, but Saul refuses to be drawn on his anointing as king.

Saul may still be coming to terms with his new destiny. But what about Samuel? Why this secrecy? It is not clear. But Israel's next king will also be anointed in secret (16:13). When God tells Samuel to anoint one of Jesse's sons as Saul's successor, Samuel objects. “But Samuel said, ‘How can I go? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me.’” So God tells him to go under the pretext of offering a sacrifice (16:2).

At least for Israel's first two kings, being anointed as king and being publicly acclaimed as king were not the same event. So perhaps it should not

surprise us if God's ultimate King is anointed as King without being acclaimed as King. And this is exactly what happens. Jesus is anointed by the Spirit at his baptism, and the Father uses the language of kingship (Luke 3:21-22; see 2 Samuel 7:14 and Psalm 2:7). But Jesus is not acknowledged as King. Instead he is despised and rejected. His acclamation as King must wait.

1 Samuel chapters 9 – 10 tell the story of Saul's "ascent" to his throne. He went "up" to the city (9:11), "up" to the high place at the city centre (9:14), "up" to the head of the table (9:22), and "up" to the roof of a house to spend the night (9:25). This is significant. The king of Israel literally "ascends" to the throne.

This will find its fulfilment when Jesus ascends into heaven. In Daniel 7 Daniel sees a vision of one like a son of man coming on the clouds before the **Ancient of Days** to receive an everlasting kingdom. "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed" (Daniel 7:13-14).

What Daniel sees from above, the disciples see from below in Luke 24 and Acts 1 when Jesus ascends through the clouds. He ascends through the clouds into heaven to be acclaimed as King.

Saul going "up" to be anointed is a picture in miniature of the true ascension. In Ephesians 1:20-21, Paul says that God "seated [Christ] in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion". Jesus is the ultimate King, with ultimate power. But why did God do this? "God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church" (v 22). Jesus has ascended to be acclaimed as King for the church. For *us*. He rules the course of history for the church.

That does not mean life for us is always easy. But it does mean Christ will

accomplish his purposes for us and for our mission. What hardship are you enduring? What discouragements you are facing? What disappointments are you bearing? Perhaps you are part of a small church and you wonder how you will make an impact in your neighbourhood. Or your efforts to tell people about Christ never seem to lead anywhere. Or you have lost the respect or even love of family and friends because of your faith. Do not give up. Christ rules all things for the church. We are on the winning side.

Questions for reflection

1. Have you experienced serving something you thought would give things to you, but in reality took far more from you?
2. How does the truth that Jesus is the royal husband of his church excite you about being a member of his people?
3. What difference will it make to your thoughts and actions today to know that Jesus Christ rules all things for the church?

1 SAMUEL 10 VERSE 1 TO 12 VERSE 25

5. King Saul

At the beginning of chapter 10, Samuel anointed Saul in secret. “Then Samuel took a flask of olive oil and poured it on Saul’s head and kissed him, saying, ‘Has not the LORD anointed you ruler over his inheritance?’” (v 1). As we saw in the previous chapter, Saul becomes king in four stages, the first of which we have already looked at:

1. A secret anointing by Samuel (9:1 – **10:1**)
2. A personal confirmation by signs (**10:2-16**)
3. A public selection by lot (**10:17-27**)
4. A victorious appointment by the people (**11:1-15**)

Signs of Confirmation

Imagine I knock on your door one evening. You invite me in and offer me a drink. At the end of the evening I tell you that I have a message from God: *You will be the next king of Great Britain*. I suspect you would not believe me! Indeed, you might well doubt my sanity. You might reasonably expect some evidence.

Samuel has somewhat more prestige than me! But it is still a lot for Saul to take in. Being told you are going to be king is extraordinary enough. But at this point, the role does not even exist! In 9:20, Samuel makes a somewhat

cryptic statement about Saul's future: "And to whom is all the desire of Israel turned, if not to you and your whole family line?" As it turns out, he means that Saul will be king. Saul will fulfil the desire of Israel for a king. Does Saul realise this at the time? Or does he simply think Samuel is suggesting he has an important role to play for the nation? It is not clear. But Saul clearly thinks either possibility is unlikely. So he responds: "But am I not a Benjaminite, from the smallest tribe of Israel, and is not my clan the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why do you say such a thing to me?" (v 21). When his uncle asks Saul what he has been up to, Saul is evasive, apparently reluctant to declare that he has been anointed king even to his family (v 13-16).

To bridge this **credibility gap**, Samuel sends Saul on his way with the promise of three signs that will prove that "God is with you" (**10:7**):

1. Two men will meet him at Rachel's tomb to tell him the lost donkeys are safe (**v 2**).
2. Three men will meet him at Bethel to offer him bread (**v 3-4**).
3. A group of prophets will meet at Gibeah with whom Saul will prophesy (**v 5-6**).

And "all these signs were fulfilled that day" (**v 9**). These signs reinforce the idea that Saul is king through God's word. This is how he becomes king; and this is how he must rule as king. This is the thrust of **verse 8**: that Saul must not supersede Samuel, God's mouthpiece, but reign according to his words.

The geography is significant. Gibeah was where the Benjaminites raped and killed a Levite's concubine (Judges 19). This outrage led the other eleven tribes of Israel to go to war against them and almost wipe them out (Judges 20 – 21). Perhaps the anointing of a Benjaminite as king of Israel is the sign that the tribe of Benjamin has been truly restored.

Rachel was Jacob's favourite wife, and Benjamin was his favourite son. One reason Benjamin was favoured by Jacob was that Rachel died in childbirth.

The reference to her tomb in 1 Samuel **10:2** is therefore a reminder of this story.

In Genesis 35:11, God promises regarding Benjamin, the son of Jacob from whom the tribe of Benjamin are descended: “I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will be among your descendants.” But in Genesis 49:10 Jacob promises Judah (another of his sons): “The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet.” This suggests a transition from a Benjaminite monarch to a Judahite monarch, a transition which is about to be played out in 1 – 2 Samuel. But perhaps the key aspect is that Judah is promised the crown only after he has offered to substitute himself for Benjamin (Genesis 44:18-34). Like David, Jesus is from the tribe of Judah. The ultimate King comes to the throne because he offers himself as a substitute for his people.

The encounter with the prophets is especially significant. 1 Samuel **10:6** says: “The Spirit of the LORD will come powerfully upon you, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a different person.” Samuel describes the three signs in **verses 2-6**. The writer is content simply to say of the first two: “All these signs were fulfilled that day” (**v 9**). But he re-describes the third sign in **verse 10**, adding: “When all those who had formerly known him saw him prophesying with the prophets, they asked each other, ‘What is this that has happened to the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?’ A man who lived there answered, ‘And who is their father?’ So it became a saying: ‘Is Saul also among the prophets?’” (**v 11-12**).

Something has happened to the son of Kish. Who is his father now? The answer is that he is among the prophets. The implication is that Samuel is now in some sense Saul’s adopted father. Just as Eli’s dissolute sons were replaced by Samuel, so now Samuel’s dissolute sons are being replaced by Saul. Just as Eli adopted Samuel as a quasi-son, so Samuel is adopting Saul as a quasi-son.

Where is this **trajectory** heading? Saul will adopt David as his quasi-son

(even though his own son, Jonathan, is the one faithful son in the narrative). David becomes Saul's son-in-law when Saul gives his daughter to be David's wife (18:20-27), and in 24:16 Saul addresses David as "my son". But the ultimate trajectory of this is 2 Samuel 7:14, where God says of David's son: "I will be his father, and he shall be my son." God himself will adopt the king of Israel as his son.

At the exodus God had called Israel his son (Exodus 4:22-23). Now the identity of Israel will be focused on the Davidic king. But ultimately, this will be fulfilled in Jesus. At his baptism God said: "You are my Son" (Mark 1:11). Jesus is the true son of David, *the* Son of God, and he will rule over God's people for ever.

Public Selection

Saul is publicly selected by lot after Samuel again rebukes the people for rejecting God as king (1 Samuel **10:17-19**). The secret choice of God is now made public. In chapter 9, lost donkeys brought Saul to Samuel under the providence of God. Saul thought he was setting out to find some animals; but in fact he was being sent by God to Samuel (9:16). Indeed, the servant's suggestion that Samuel can tell them "what way to take" is literally "our way on which we have walked" (9:6). It suggests the servant thinks Samuel will not so much tell them what to do next, as tell the true significance of their strange journey. Now God's providence is again seen as the lot falls to Saul (**10:20-21**).

But ominously, even before his reign begins, Saul is lost! The people get the king they asked for. And immediately, they cannot find him (**v 21**). The story started with a quest to "find" some lost donkeys. Now the king himself cannot be "found". So the people must enquire of the LORD. They will not trust God to deliver them (**v 19**). But they cannot even find their own king

without God's help (**v 22**).

Why can they not find their king? Because their king “has hidden himself” (**v 22**). It is hardly an **auspicious** start for the one they believe will “go out before us and fight our battles” (8:20)! But they are so blinded by their determination to have a king that when they find him, they hail him with the words: “There is no one like him among all the people” (**10:24**).

Back in 8:11, Samuel described what the “justice” of the king would be like. In **10:25** the same word is used again, but this time Samuel is declaring what the justice of the king should be like. In chapter 8 Samuel tells the people all that the king “will claim as his rights”. But here Samuel writes out “the rights and duties of kingship” (**10:25**; see also Deuteronomy 17:18-19). Perhaps, now that he has been found, Saul will be the king that God's people need.

Victorious Appointment

Saul's kingship gets off to a slow start. He returns home (1 Samuel **10:26**), but some “scoundrels” (literally “sons of Belial” or “sons of wickedness”) publicly doubt his abilities and despise him; Saul stays quiet (**verse 27**). And we might expect Saul to move into a palace and surround himself with a royal court. Yet the next time we meet Saul, he is “returning from the fields, behind his oxen” (**11:5**).

But when Saul hears about the plight of Jabesh Gilead, he leaps into action. This Israelite town has been besieged by Nahash, the king of the Ammonites (**v 1**). He has given them an ultimatum. He will let them make a peace treaty only if they agree to have their right eyes gouged out (**v 2**). His intent is clear: to “bring disgrace on all Israel”. Nahash agrees to a seven-day reprieve to see if anyone from Israel will come to defend the city and protect Israel's honour (**v 3**). As the news reaches Gibeah, there seems to be no hope (**v 4**).

But Saul does not hear the news until he returns from his fields (**v 5**). How will Israel's new king react?

"When Saul heard their words, the Spirit of God came powerfully upon him, and he burned with anger" (**v 6**). Saul gathers all Israel to fight as one (**v 7-8**). Unsurprisingly, the people of Jabesh Gilead are "elated" when they hear this news (**v 9**). Their message to Nahash implies they will surrender and perhaps lulls him into a false sense of complacency. But it is an ambiguous statement. They literally say: "Tomorrow we will come out to you" (**v 10**). It is the same phrase as the phrase "go out", which the people used in their request for "a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles" in 8:20. "We will come out to you" might sound like a surrender, but in fact it is a warning of coming into battle. The following day Saul arrives as promised (probably after an overnight trek), and thoroughly defeats the Ammonites (**v 11**).

As a result the people come together to "renew the kingship" (**v 14**). "So all the people went to Gilgal and made Saul king in the presence of the LORD. There they sacrificed fellowship offerings before the LORD, and Saul and all the Israelites held a great celebration" (**v 15**).

Saul is being raised up, or exalted. And it is God who is doing the raising up or exalting. This is a fulfilment of Hannah's song: "The LORD ... he humbles and he exalts" (2:7).

But it is also a foreboding of what might come to pass. In 9:2, Saul is said to be "a head taller than anyone else"—this is repeated in **10:23**. It is the same word as "proudly" in Hannah's song: "Do not keep talking so proudly" or highly of yourself (2:3). So introducing Saul as a "tall" man is a bad sign to those who listened carefully to Hannah's song. In chapters 4 – 7 the issue was weight, echoing the symbolic sense of weight in chapter 2. In chapters 8 – 17 the issue is height, again echoing the symbolic sense of height in chapter 2.

When Samuel sees Jesse's eldest son, Eliab, he is told: "Do not consider his

appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (16:7). The rejection of Eliab despite his height must bode ill for tall Saul. Indeed, when Saul has his final encounter with the ghost of Samuel, we are told: "Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, filled with fear because of Samuel's words" (28:20). It is literally "fell full height on the ground". In contrast, little David conquers a giant of great height (the same root word as 9:2). As he will put it when he nears the end of his long reign: "You save the humble, but your eyes are on the haughty to bring them low ... You armed me with strength for battle; you humbled my adversaries before me." (2 Samuel 22:28, 40).

It is all too easy for Christians to feel intimidated today. We are not part of the establishment. We are not among the cultural elite. Our friends may scorn our faith, and our church may have little influence within our neighbourhood.

We are the lowly within our culture. **Secular** or **humanist** or **pluralist** viewpoints dominate. They are exalted in the media. They are raised to the status of social norms. So it is tempting to think we are wrong. Perhaps we are on the wrong side. But the promise of 1 Samuel is "The LORD ... he humbles and he exalts" (1 Samuel 2:7). Not only is this what Hannah sings, but it is what we see in the narrative of 1 Samuel. And it is what we see most supremely in Jesus. At the cross, he was brought low. To judge by outward appearances, Jesus was a failure. Yet: "God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name" (Philippians 2:9).

So "do not consider ... appearance or ... height". God has rejected the pride of humanity. We can look with eyes of faith and see the triumph of Christ, and in him the triumph of his people.

Questions for reflection

1. Do you ever find yourself rejecting God's rule but asking him for help, as Israel does when they seek for Saul?
2. When you consider setbacks, do you tend to weep in despair, or look to God's chosen King in hope?
3. When, and why, do you feel intimidated as a Christian? How does Jesus' life, death and exaltation encourage you?

PART TWO

On Trial

All the early signs are positive for Saul. He is humble and does not seize the kingdom (1 Samuel 9:21). He refuses to take revenge on those who have opposed him even when it is in his grasp (**11:12-13**). The key to understanding the change in Saul's life is to recognise that in chapter 11, Saul rules like a judge.

The chapter is full of allusions to the book of Judges:

- The Spirit comes on Saul with mighty power (**11:6**) as he did on the judges (Judges 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6).
- Gibeah, Saul's hometown, was the place in Benjamin where the Levite's concubine was raped and then cut into pieces to be posted round Israel as a summons to battle (Judges 19 – 21). Now Saul cuts up an oxen to post round Israel as a summons to battle.
- Jabesh Gilead was the one city that refused to go to war against Benjamin, so they were attacked and their virgins kidnapped (Judges 21). This had led to the near destruction of Jabesh Gilead. But in a strange twist, the saviour of Jabesh Gilead will come from Gibeah.
- Even the numbers in Saul's army remind us of the judges, specifically Gideon's army: 300,000 from Israel plus 30,000 from Judah (1 Samuel 11:8)—both are multiples of Gideon's 300.
- Bezek, where Saul gathers his army, was the site of the first military victory in Judges (Judges 1:4-5).

- Gilgal, where Samuel takes them after the victory, was the place where Joshua renewed the covenant in Joshua 5.

So in 1 Samuel 11 Saul is an old-style ruler, mediating the rule of God. This is how Saul himself describes it: “This day the LORD has rescued Israel” (**11:13**).

Saul is not made king until **verse 15**. The defeat of the Ammonites takes place before he becomes king. God raises him as a judge to rescue his people—just as God has previously delivered Israel. But this will change in **verses 12-15** with the confirmation of Saul as king. This marks the moment when he ceases to be a judge, raised up by God as an expression of God’s rule. In chapters 13 – 15, Saul will show himself to be a new-style king. Instead of mediating God’s rule, he will *replace* God’s rule. Instead of liberating God’s people, he will oppress God’s people. Instead of being exalted by God, Saul will exalt himself... only to be brought low by God (31:8; 2 Samuel 1:19, 25, 27).

Samuel’s Trial

The story of Saul’s appointment as king ends as it began with a warning speech from Samuel. The section may be structured in a chiastic pattern which highlights this parallel beginning and end:

- a. Samuel makes a speech in response to Israel’s request for a king (1 Samuel 8:1-22)
- b. Saul is privately proclaimed as king (9:1 – **10:16**)
- c. Saul’s choice as king is rejected by the “sons of Belial” (**10:17-27**)
- d. Saul defeats Nahash (**11:1-11**)
- c’. Saul refuses to avenge the “sons of Belial” (**11:12-13**)

b'. Saul is publicly acclaimed as king (**11:14-15**)

a'. Samuel makes a speech in response to Israel's request for a king (**12:1-25**)

Chapter 12 is a farewell speech. Though Samuel continues as a prophet, he retires as a military leader. He is no longer called "a judge". But more significantly chapter 12 is a trial. This is clear from the language Samuel uses throughout his speech: "Here I stand"; "Testify against me in the presence of the LORD and his anointed" (**12:3**); "The LORD is witness against you"; "He is witness" (**v 5**); "I am going to confront you with evidence before the LORD" (**v 7**).

But if this is a trial, who is in the dock?

First up is Samuel (**v 1-5**): "Here I stand. Testify against me in the presence of the LORD and his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed? From whose hand have I accepted a bribe to make me shut my eyes? If I have done any of these things, I will make it right" (**v 3**).

In 8:16 Samuel, speaking about their future king, warned that: "The best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use". In contrast, he himself has not "taken" their oxen or donkeys. The people testify that Samuel has not cheated or oppressed anyone (**12:4-5**).

God Versus the People

The way is clear for the real trial to take place: God versus the people. By asking for a king to replace God, the people have in effect accused God of failing in his divine kingship. The people will be vindicated if God is condemned. But if God is vindicated, then the people will be condemned. That is how a Hebrew law court worked.

So Samuel begins: “Now then, stand here, because I am going to confront you with evidence before the LORD as to all the righteous acts performed by the LORD for you and your ancestors” (v 7). God rescued Israel from Egypt and gave them the promised land (v 6, 8). But they forgot God (v 9). In other words, they lived as if he did not exist or as if he did not matter. So God judged them by handing them over to their enemies (v 9). When they cried for mercy, God sent a succession of judges to deliver them (v 10-11). Time and again, God proved to be faithful and able to deliver his people when they sought his help. Yet, despite God’s faithfulness, when King Nahash of the Ammonites threatened, the Israelites asked for a king in God’s place (v 12). The evidence points to only one verdict: God is faithful and Israel is unfaithful; God is vindicated and Israel is condemned. Samuel ends with a call for Israel and her king to obey God (v 13-15).

With the verdict clear, the judgment is made. Samuel calls upon God to send thunder and rain on the wheat harvest (v 16-18).

The people stand in awe as the verdict is passed (v 18) and ask Samuel to intercede on their behalf: “for we have added to all our other sins the evil of asking for a king” (v 19). Each verse of Samuel’s response is full of significance.

First, he tells them: “Do not be afraid ... You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart” (v 20).

Israel has sinned, and judgment has been passed. But this is not the end of the story, because God is gracious. The possibility of repentance is still open. The logic of this verse is intriguing. We might expect it to say: *You have done all this evil; so turn back to God.* But the logic seems to be: *You have turned from God to evil, but do not turn from God to evil.* That is probably because a recognition of sin can confirm people in their sin. They can think they are without hope. Or they can think sin is their identity and this cannot be changed. *There is no hope for people like me or I can’t change,* they might say. But Samuel says: *You are sinners, but you do not have to remain sinners. This judgment does not need to confirm you as someone who is “away from*

the LORD".

Second, he says: "Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless" (**v 21**).

People tend to think of idols as statues in temples. But no images or foreign gods are named in this story. So what are the idols about which Samuel warns? The idolatry of a human structure, perhaps? Or the idolatry of self-rule? These idols do not belong to antiquity. Unlike statues, which we can complacently assign to other times and other cultures, these idols cross all cultural and historical boundaries. It forces us to ask: *What about my idols?* In **verse 21** Samuel gives us a couple of criteria for identifying idols in our lives:

- What do you think would make your life good? ("do you ... good")
- What do you think would stop your life being bad? ("rescue you")

For any answer other than "God", Samuel's verdict on it is that it is "useless". It will not do you good; it will not prevent bad; it will not save you today, or eternally.

Third, Samuel says: "For the sake of his great name the LORD will not reject his people, because the LORD was pleased to make you his own" (**v 22**). What drives God's actions is his passion for his glory. He acts "for the sake of his great name". We see this played out in the New Testament. The Father delights in his Son and he delights to see his Son honoured. The Son delights to bring glory to his Father. The Spirit works to see both the Father and the Son glorified in and through one another. It is for this we pray when we pray: "Hallowed [or honoured] be your name" (Luke 11:2).

The warning of judgment in the passage is clear. But here is a solid basis for hope. Judgment may fall. For some it will be irrevocable. But God will glorify his name in a people whom he is "pleased to make ... his own" (1 Samuel **12:22**). And one day that glory and that people will extend to the ends of the earth.

Fourth, Samuel tells the people: “As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right” (**12:23**).

We sin not only when we do what we ought not to do (a “sin of commission”), but also when we do not do what we ought to do (a “sin of omission”). Samuel says that failing to pray and failing to teach can be a sin.

Fifth, Samuel exhorts his listeners to “be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you” (**v 24**).

This verse is key to understanding what it means to be God’s people. Who are God’s people? Those who serve him full of faith. As Paul makes clear in Romans 4 and Galatians 3, it is not ethnic identity that defines God’s people, but faith in the “great things he has done for [us]”. It is not our actions that define us, but God’s actions.

And then finally, Samuel gives a warning: “If you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will perish” (1 Samuel **12:25**), or “be swept away” (ESV).

This is an echo of the warning of Deuteronomy 28:64-68. Deuteronomy 28 lists the curses that will fall on God’s people if they are not faithful to God. And the climactic curse is that of exile, or being “swept away”. The appointment of a king does not change this, other than the fact that from now on the king will have a decisive influence on the nation as a whole. If exile does come, it will come on “both you and your king”. It will still come. Israel wanted a king to fight their battles; but no king will be able to defend them from God’s judgment. Except one.

Questions for reflection

1. What idols are you most struggling not to worship and trust right now?
2. Can you identify the false promise of that idol, and how it will in fact do you no good?
3. What will it look like for you to turn back to the living God and worship him alone?

1 SAMUEL 13 VERSE 1 TO 15 VERSE 35

6. Adam Revisited

In the middle of these chapters are two summary verses that speak of how King Saul “fought valiantly ... delivering Israel from the hands of those who had plundered them” (14:47-48). But the writer’s concern is not with Saul’s successes, but his failures.

The king of the Ammonites whom Saul defeated in chapter 11 is called “Nahash”. It means “snake” or “serpent”. After Adam and Eve succumbed to the lies of the snake in the Garden of Eden, God said to the snake: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15). God promises that one of the descendants of Eve will crush the snake and restore what Adam had lost.

In 1 Samuel 11, it looks as if Saul might be the new Adam who will crush the snake. But in chapters 13 – 15 he turns out to repeat the behaviour of the old Adam. God’s King will crush the snake, as Saul foreshadowed in 1 Samuel 11. But that ultimate King is not Saul. Saul is not the snake-crusher. And he is not the redeemer of humanity. Saul is Adam. Saul is humanity.

In chapter 11, Saul rules like a judge, as we saw in the previous chapter. But this changes in 11:12-15, with his public affirmation as king. So 13:1 tells us: “Saul was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel for forty-two years”. This is what would become the standard way of introducing a king in the **annals** of Israelite history—a statement of the king’s age at succession and the length of his reign. It suggests that **verse 1** marks the real beginning of Saul’s reign. Previously, Saul was only king-designate, and he reigned in the style of a God-empowered judge. But from

here on, Saul will rule as king.

And he will rule as the king the people asked for. Remember “Saul” means “asked for”; so he becomes the Saul they “sauled”. He becomes a king like those of the nations.

In 8:10-18 Samuel warned that a king would take. This is precisely what Saul does. “Whenever Saul saw a mighty or brave man, he took him into his service” (14:52). In 8:19-20, the people reiterated their request for a king who will lead them out in battle. But as it turns out, it is Jonathan who does this in 13:3 and 14:1—not Saul.

The Kingdom will be Torn Away

Through Samuel, God had driven the Philistines from the land and given the people peace (7:13-14). But now, the Philistines are strong again. So Saul chooses 3,000 men to counter this threat. The rest are sent home (13:2). It recalls Gideon’s army of 300 with the rest sent home (Judges 7:7-8). So far, so good.

Jonathan initiates the battle (1 Samuel 13:3). This attack on a Philistine outpost provokes all-out war. Saul summons his troops (v 4). The Philistines likewise gather their army. God promised Abraham that his descendant would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore. The writer uses the same expression in **verse 5**, but here it is turned against Israel; it describes the Philistine army. Faced with this vast army, the Israelites are terrified. Most hide in caves, thickets, pits and cisterns (v 6). Some quit the battlefield altogether. “All the troops with [Saul] were quaking with fear” (v 7).

It seems Saul has some arrangement with Samuel. Samuel will come to offer a sacrifice and bless the army. But the time of Samuel’s arrival has come and gone. More of the men begin to scatter (v 8). You can imagine

Saul scanning the horizon, repeatedly asking whether anyone has seen Samuel, watching in horror as more troops desert. In the end, even though only a priest could offer a sacrifice, he offers it himself (**v 9**).

Just as he finishes, Samuel arrives (**v 10**). “You have done a foolish thing,” says Samuel (**v 13**). As a result of Saul’s impatience and disobedience, the kingdom will be taken from his family (**v 13-14**).

We might be inclined to have some sympathy for Saul. An army haemorrhaging soldiers is an alarming prospect. Meanwhile Samuel’s intervention sounds both harsh and rude. But “fool” or “foolish” has a particular meaning in the Old Testament. It is not simply the ancient equivalent of calling someone an idiot. According to Psalm 14:1: “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’”. This is not an atheist, but someone who lives as though God does not exist or God does not matter. Saul’s problem was that he acted as though God would not act. He did “not [keep] the LORD’s command” because he did not really trust the LORD (1 Samuel **13:13-14**).

Saul is left with 600 men (**v 15**). This is still twice the number Gideon had when he defeated the Midianites in Judges 7. We have already seen the writer echoing the story of Gideon in 1 Samuel **13:2**. Now there is another echo of Gideon. Gideon divided his army into three cohorts. But here it is the Philistines who divide into three detachments (**v 17-18**). In chapter 11, Saul was portrayed as a new judge, empowered by God’s Spirit to bring peace to God’s people. But now he is an anti-judge. Now he reigns (or fails to reign) not as God’s empowered deliverer, but as the people’s powerless king. He is replaying the story of Gideon in reverse.

Saul’s powerlessness is emphasised by the fact that Israel has no weapons. The Philistines have used their power to corner the market in blacksmiths (**13:19**). Israel is forced to pay over the odds to have their tools sharpened (**v 20-21**). More importantly, the Israelite army has no weapons. Throughout the entire army, only Saul and Jonathan have a sword or spear (**v 22**). It is not looking good.

Saul does have Ahijah the priest; but he is “a son of Ichabod’s brother Ahitub son of Phinehas” (**14:3**). This is not a good omen. Phinehas’ corruption led to defeat (2:12-36); Ichabod was so named because he was born on the day of that defeat when God’s glory deserted Israel (4:21-22). So when Saul summons the ark (**14:18**), we are meant to remember that the last time that happened, it ended in defeat (4:4). Far from bringing hope to Israel, Saul is repeating their mistakes.

When Samuel confronts Saul in **13:11**, he begins with a question—“What have you done?”—just as God did with Adam in Genesis 3:9—“Where are you?”. Saul responds with excuses. He blames the men for leaving and the Philistines for arriving (1 Samuel **13:11-12**). He blames Samuel for not coming on time (**v 11**). Saul is again portrayed as a new Adam. But this is not Adam the snake-crusher. This is Adam the sinner, the excuse-maker (see Genesis 3:12). Saul is not the promised second Adam. He is the old Adam revisited.

Israel’s new start with a new king has foundered because the underlying unbelief and disobedience of humanity in Adam has not changed. We need a king who will not only rescue us from our enemies, but also from ourselves. We need a king who can take on sin and liberate us from our slavery to our sinful desires. We need a king who obeys God in all circumstances, even when put under the pressure of unfavourable circumstances. Saul is not that man. So his kingdom will not endure. It cannot. Instead, the LORD will give it to “a man after his own heart” (1 Samuel **13:13-14**).

The “man after his own heart” is not an expression of the future king’s godliness. It is an expression of God’s choice. The Australian theologian John Woodhouse says it means:

*“a man of God’s own choosing, a man God has set his heart on. [It is] talking about the place the man has in God’s heart rather than the place God has in the man’s heart”.
(Woodhouse, 1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader, page 287)*

Years later, David will reflect on what God has done for him. “For the sake of your word and according to your will, you have done this great thing and

made it known to your servant” (2 Samuel 7:21). “According to your will” is literally “after your own heart”—the exact same expression used in 1 Samuel **13:14**. David has been exalted because of what was in God’s heart—his sovereign, gracious will. “Saul” means “asked for”. He is the king the people asked for. He is the people’s choice. And his reign ends in failure. David will be God’s choice. And from his dynasty will come the new Adam, the snake-crusher.

The Son Who Saves

Jonathan is introduced to us in 13:2, but we are not told that he is Saul’s son until **verse 16**. But by this point we already know that he will not inherit Saul’s throne. The irony is that, in a story of dissolute sons, Jonathan is the shining exception.

A key theme in chapters 13 – 14 is the contrast between fear and faith. Saul loses the kingdom because he acted in unbelief. Fear drove his actions; and so his actions were disobedient. Jonathan is the opposite: faith directs him. He will “go over” in faith (**14:1**), while Saul “was staying” where he was in fear (**v 2**).

Jonathan is outnumbered and has to advance up a steep cliff. The names of the two cliffs are literally “Slippery” (*Bozez*) and “Thorny” (*Senneh*), which are hardly encouraging names for someone embarking on a climb under fire (**v 4-5**)!

But Jonathan acts from faith. He describes the Philistines as “**uncircumcised** men” (**v 6**). He sees this not simply as a battle between Israel and Philistia, but between the covenant people of God and the enemies of God. He continues: “Perhaps the LORD will act on our behalf. Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few” (**v 6**).

The “perhaps” does not mean Jonathan doubts God’s ability to save, as the second half of the verse makes clear. Rather, he is allowing God to be God. God is sovereign, and will save if he so chooses.

The faith of Jonathan is echoed in the loyalty of his armour-bearer (**v 7**). Jonathan is confident that God *can* intervene to give them the victory. But, to determine *whether* God will intervene in this instance, he agrees a test with his armour-bearer. If the Philistines invite them to come up, they will know God plans to defeat the Philistines (**v 8-10**).

Sure enough, the Philistines invite Jonathan to “come up to us and we’ll teach you a lesson” (**v 12**). And so Jonathan says to his armour-bearer: “Climb up after me; the LORD has given them into the hand of Israel” (**v 12**). The Philistines invite Jonathan to “come up” so they can teach him a lesson. But Jonathan’s ascent leads to their “fall” (**v 13**).

Jonathan kills some twenty men (**v 14**); and that is enough to throw the Philistine army into panic, because “it was a panic sent by God” (**v 15**). Saul sees the Philistine army “melting away” and so musters the army for an attack (**v 16-17**). The deserters return to the fight (**v 20-22**), and so “on that day the LORD saved Israel” (**v 23**).

The language the writer uses to narrate Jonathan’s attack is highly significant. He describes the terrain in some detail. Jonathan has to go down one cliff and up another to reach the Philistine outpost. He must descend and then ascend. The two cliffs are both described in **verse 4** as “a tooth-crag” (it is the word used in the famous phrase “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” in Exodus 21:24). 1 Samuel **14:5** is literally: “One tooth stood to the north towards Michmash, the other to the south towards Geba”. It suggests a pair of jaws. When the Philistines see Jonathan, they exclaim: “The Hebrews are crawling out of the holes they were hiding in” (**verse 11**). It suggests they are crawling out of tombs. Psalm 141:7 talks about “the mouth of the grave”, and Psalms 49:14 and Proverbs 27:20 describe death as eating its victims. Taken together, these allusions picture Jonathan descending into the grave before ascending to bring victory to God’s people.

The Son Must Die

There is an extended postscript to the story of the battle of Michmash. Saul has bound the men not to eat anything until the battle is over (**verse 24**). Whereas Jonathan saw this as a battle for the LORD's honour, Saul describes it as a battle that will not be over until "I have avenged myself on my enemies!" (**v 24**) As a result of this foolish oath, the troops were "in distress". It is the same word as that translated "hard pressed" in **13:6**. In chapter 13, the army were hard pressed because they faced an overwhelming army. But now in chapter 14, they are hard pressed because of their own king. It is hard work fighting on an empty stomach.

Even when the troops find honey in the woods, none of them dares to eat it because of the oath (**14:25-26**). Jonathan, however, was off attacking the Philistine outpost when Saul gave the command not to eat; so he goes ahead and eats the honey (**v 27**). Even when he is told, he continues to eat, dismissing his father's command as folly (**v 28-30**). Instead of bringing a curse as Saul claimed, Jonathan says the honey brings blessing, brightening the eyes (**v 29**).

Perhaps following Jonathan's lead or perhaps because the battle has now been won, the Israelites start eating some of the livestock they have plundered (**v 31-35**). Saul's foolish oath has made the people so hungry that they do not wait to cook it properly (**v 32**). But Saul intervenes, because God had forbidden eating meat with blood still in it (**v 33-35**). The blood symbolised life and life belongs to God (Leviticus 17:10-13).

Saul wants to continue the pursuit of the Philistines through the night (1 Samuel **14:36**). But he is persuaded to first enquire of the LORD (**v 36**). "But God did not answer him that day" (**v 37**). Why not? Samuel had used the very same expression to warn the people when they asked for a king. "When

that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the LORD will not answer you in that day” (8:18). In 14:19, Saul silenced God when God would speak. Now in **verse 37**, he wants God to speak when God is silent.

But Saul assumes this is someone else’s fault (**v 38**). So he calls the people together and says: “As surely as the LORD who rescues Israel lives, even if the guilt lies with my son Jonathan, he must die” (**v 39**). The **Urim and Thummim** are used to **cast lots** (in a reminder of the sin of Achan in Joshua 7). Imagine the tension! And then the lot falls to Saul and Jonathan (1 Samuel **14:40-42**).

“Tell me what you have done,” demands Saul in **verse 43**. It is an echo of Samuel’s question to Saul in 13:11. Jonathan’s response highlights the absurdity of the situation. “I tasted a little honey with the end of my staff. And now must I die!” (**v 43**). But Saul confirms that Jonathan must die (**v 44**). Probably Saul’s primary motive is to save face, especially in the face of Jonathan’s sarcasm. Saul has recently prevented his men eating the blood of animals. Now he plans to shed the blood of his own son. But the army intervenes to save Jonathan, arguing that he is the hero who has delivered Israel (**v 45**).

The focus of this section is Saul’s failure as a king, and that theme comes to its climax in chapter 15. Here, Jonathan is a foil to his father. Saul acts in fear; Jonathan acts in faith.

So Jonathan is an example to us, and we must not miss the challenge. In faith, we can attempt brave things for God. But Jonathan is more than an example; he is also a pointer to Jesus, and we must not miss the thrill. We can be brave because Jesus has won the victory by descending to the cross. He has gone through the jaws of death, and death consumed him. But he has risen again to overcome sin and death. In 1 Samuel 14, we are not to place ourselves in Jonathan’s shoes; Jesus is the one who has stood there, cosmically and finally. We are called to follow; to trust the Son, who takes us through death and to life, and to trust him enough to walk behind him.

Questions for reflection

1. Can you think of times when common sense stands opposed to obeying God?
2. How do Jonathan's actions help you to be thrilled about what Jesus has done for you?
3. How does Jonathan's example prompt you to attempt brave things for God? What are you being called to do?

PART TWO

Saul and the Amalekites

In **14:46-52** the writer summarises the victories of Saul and his family. The impression we are left with is that in many ways Saul was a successful king—he “inflicted punishment” on Israel’s enemies (**v 47**), and “fought valiantly and defeated the Amalekites”—those who had once plundered God’s people were now defeated by God’s king (**v 48**). He confronted the Philistines in “bitter war” (**v 52**).

And yet in chapter 15 God will reject Saul as king. So these victories are not described in detail because the interest of the writer is elsewhere. He wants to show why Saul had the kingdom taken from him.

In chapter 15, Samuel brings a message to Saul from God. Here is the message: God will punish the Amalekites for their mistreatment of the Israelites when they first escaped from Egypt (**15:1-2**; Exodus 17:8-16). Saul is to attack them and completely destroy all that belongs to them: men, women, children and animals (1 Samuel **15:3**).

To modern ears, this sounds alarmingly like ethnic cleansing. But this is ethical cleansing rather than ethnic cleansing. This is an act of judgment against sin. Destruction will come to the Amalekites not because they are Amalekites, but because they are sinners. In a sense, this should alarm us. Not because it is unfair, but because it is fair; and because while we are not Amalekites, we are sinners. Their destruction is a picture of what humanity deserves, and faces, from God. When judgment comes, nothing—*nothing*—is left.

So this makes the story no less alarming. For it means it is a picture of God's intent against all sin and therefore against all humanity. The fate of the Amalekites is not an exception from a by-gone era. It is a pointer to the coming day of judgment. If we are inclined to minimise divine judgment, it is perhaps because we are inclined to minimise human sin. And that was Saul's problem.

The Excuses of Sin

Saul duly defeats the Amalekites (v 4-9). And so when Samuel comes to him after the battle, Saul says: "The LORD bless you! I have carried out the LORD's instructions" (v 13). It looks as if Saul is truly obedient.

But in fact, Saul's obedience is not for real. How do we know? Because we can hear the bleating of sheep. "But Samuel said, 'What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?'" (v 14). *Why can I hear animal noises when all the animals are dead?*

Saul confesses what he has done. It looks as if Saul is truly repentant. "I have sinned. I violated the LORD's command and your instructions" (v 24).

But Saul's repentance is not for real. How do we know? Because of what Saul says next. "I was afraid of the men and so I gave in to them. Now I beg you, forgive my sin and come back with me, so that I may worship the LORD" (v 24-25). It is all so easy. *Yes, yes, I did wrong. I was under a lot of pressure. Let's forgive and forget. Let's move on. Why the fuss?*

Yet sin is serious; perhaps not to Saul, but to God. So Saul cannot set the terms for his forgiveness; he cannot demand it. Samuel repeats his word of judgment: "I will not go back with you. You have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you as king over Israel" (v 26). *Didn't you hear me?* he seems to be saying. *Don't you realise how serious this is?*

Samuel sees the truth that sin has serious consequences being pictured in the tearing of his robe—Saul’s kingdom will be torn away from him (**v 27-28**). Sin matters.

Saul speaks the right words. But they are not for real. And that is shown still more clearly by his next words: “I have sinned. But please honour me before the elders of my people and before Israel; come back with me, so that I may worship the LORD your God” (**v 30**). What is his main concern? His standing before others. He is not grieved over his sin. He is only worried about his reputation.

Saul may not be truly regretful, or angry about what he has done. But Samuel is; and so is God (**v 10-11, 34-35**). Every sin leads to mourning and sorrow. If we will not mourn over our sin, then God will mourn over us.

The final evidence that neither Saul’s repentance, nor his obedience are for real is that they do not lead to action. His “repentance” does not result in a changed life. That is the real test. You can say all the right words. But sincere repentance leads to a changed life—not a perfect life, but a life of struggle with sin, a life of change.

And all Saul’s “repentance” leads only to excuses. It is well worth studying them in a little detail... because it is very easy for his words to be ours, too.

1. *Look at what I HAVE done (v 20). I may have spared Agag, says Saul, but I’ve destroyed everything else as I was told.* In effect, Saul is saying: *Partial obedience is enough.* How easy it is to excuse sin on the basis that we have not sinned in other ways! *I may have got angry with him at church; but at least I was at church! Yes, I looked at soft porn on the web. But I didn’t look at anything worse.* Partial obedience equals disobedience. It does not excuse it.
2. *Everyone else does it (v 15, 21).* Saul talks about what “the soldiers” have done. *Don’t single me out, we might say. Everyone else does it.* Or: *I know I’ve done wrong, but other people are worse than me.* But it is no excuse for sin. Imagine you were caught shoplifting. You could

not say: *Lots of other people steal things from shops. Some people even use guns. So I should be let off.* It would not work in a court of law; it does not work with God. He holds each of us accountable for our own actions. We must not take our standards from, or justify our actions based on a comparison with, other people, but from and with God's word.

3. *It seemed the sensible thing to do (v 15). Killing all those animals seemed such a waste so we decided there was a better use for them. It made sense. Surely you can see that it was the best thing to do in the circumstances.* I heard of a church with a software license for one computer who used the software on several machines. It saved so much money. It seemed to make good sense. But it was theft. Common sense does not trump God's word. Indeed, it is when God's word does not "make sense" to us that we discover what we really obey and submit to; his ways, or our own.
4. *I did it for God (v 21). It may technically have been a sin, but my motives were good. I did it for God.* People gossip and then say: *I thought someone should know.* People break the speed limit in order not to be late for a church meeting. People exaggerate in order to make their testimony sound more impressive. All "for God". All sinning against him. God does not need us to break his laws in order for his will to be done.
5. *I was afraid of other people (v 24).* Was Saul really afraid of the people? Perhaps it was just an excuse. But really, it makes no difference. Fear of others is no justification for sin. Jesus put it bluntly, and brilliantly: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). Fear of people is a common underlying reason for sin. We fear the rejection of other people or we crave their acceptance. We will do whatever it takes to fit in, be accepted or be affirmed by them; even if in doing so we put ourselves in a position where all we deserve from God is exclusion, rejection and condemnation.

We can also use these excuses when we are pastoring other people. Someone tells us about their sin, and we minimise it by repeating one of these excuses. *Don't worry about it*, we might say. *You're a good person most of the time* or *Everyone else does it* or *Your motives were good* or *You were doing your best* or *You are tired... ill... under a lot of pressure at the moment*.

We think we are helping, but excuses do not bring true freedom and forgiveness. Freedom and forgiveness come through honest repentance.

The Blasphemy Problem

The real problem underlying all these excuses is this: we take it upon ourselves to decide what is right and wrong, what matters and what does not. We judge other people for their failings, and excuse our own. We play God. We think we know better than God. We act as if we are the judge of the world.

We should call this for what it is: **blasphemy**. The excuses do not make our sin better. They make it worse. Not only do we sin, but we then decide what is right and wrong. We do not trust God's word to be true and good. We sack God.

Saul's problem was his prideful blasphemy. Samuel says: "Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel" (1 Samuel **15:17**; see also **v 1**). Even Saul thought he was a nobody until God appointed him to be king. But now Saul is full of himself. After the battle Samuel discovers that Saul has gone to Carmel. "There he has set up a monument in his own honour" (**v 12**). Everything that Saul is, he is because of God's goodness. But Saul thinks he knows better than God. He thinks he deserves the honour. He

thinks he *is* better than God.

Even as we read this passage, it is tempting to judge God. It is legitimate to ask the questions about God's call to destroy everything. We can give some answers.

- This was God's judgment on sinful people (**v 2**) and God treats people **corporately** in both salvation and judgment (Romans 5:12-21).
- This was to safeguard Israel's purity and their holiness (1 John 2:13-15).
- This is a picture of the fate awaiting all unbelievers. Today, and every day, people die unprepared to face the judgment of God and eternal hell.

We can give some answers. But ultimately we must submit to God. He is the just Judge, who judges sinners. And this is what he decided to do in this particular situation. It is a terrible role-reversal if we decide we should judge the Judge.

Ultimately, 1 Samuel **15:22-23** takes us to the heart of this story: "What is more pleasing to the LORD: your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to his voice?" (NLT). We talk about our excuses, and everything becomes grey or unclear. We downplay our sin, go through the motions of church attendance, Bible reading and so on... but what is pleasing to the LORD? "Your obedience to his voice."

The pursuit of obedience is the unambiguous measure of faith (Romans 1:5). 1 Samuel 15 begins with Samuel telling Saul to "listen now to the message from the LORD" (**v 1**). The same word is used in **verse 22**, where Samuel talks about "obedience to his voice". With true repentance, there is a desire to listen to God's word and to listen in order to obey.

When we do not repent, our voice rules our life or we are ruled by the voices of other people. But when we repent, it is God's voice that shapes our lives. That is the test: are we listening to the voice of God? Are we

submitting to his word? Are we letting God's word rule our lives? A repentant person is a listening person—a person who listens to the voice of God.

We can sum up by saying that true repentance has the following characteristics:

1. *An end to excuses.* We face up to our guilt and responsibility rather than offering excuses for our sin. When someone's talk about sin is punctuated with excuses, there is not true repentance.
2. *A movement towards God.* Repentance is turning back to God. It is more than frustration or shame with oneself. It is more than a concern for one's reputation with others. It is God-ward in orientation. When someone talks about their shame or frustration, but leaves God out of the picture, there is not true repentance.
3. *A movement that results in action.* True repentance leads to a change of life (2 Corinthians 7:10-13). When repentance does not lead to action, there is not true repentance.

The Glory of Israel

Samuel describes God's glory in terms of his consistency: "He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind" (1 Samuel **15:29**). God is true to his character: he "does not ... change his mind". And he is true to his word: he "does not lie". The gracious God is always gracious. The holy God is always holy. The just God is always just. The loving God is always loving. The faithful God always keeps his word.

Yet in **verse 11**, God "regret[s]" making Saul king. How can he do this when he is the God who never changes his mind?! They appear contradictory. But

the key is that Saul has changed, not God. “I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions” (v 11, NIV1984). Saul changes his character; and so God changes his actions in order to be consistent with *his* character. God does not change his mind; he does change his response.

God does not change. He is not capricious or moody. He is consistent. He is faithful. And that is his glory. And it is our glory. God is the Glory of his people. Our glory is the faithfulness of God.

God’s consistency means he judges those who are unrepentant. He always judges every sin consistently. But God’s consistency also means he saves those who are repentant. When we turn to him, he shows mercy because this is what he has promised to do to those who are repentant. His actions change not because he has changed his character, but because we have changed our attitude.

The rejection of Saul does not mean the rejection of God’s plan or God’s people. God will be faithful to his promises. In the next chapter, we’ll see God telling Samuel to anoint a new king—King David. And one day David’s Son, Jesus, will rescue his people from their sins. God’s consistency spells doom to the unrepentant, for he always judges justly. But his consistency is the hope—the only hope—of the repentant, because he is faithful to his promise to save those who repent through the death of Jesus.

Questions for reflection

1. How do you respond to God's command to wipe out the Amalekites?
Do you need to pray about it and/or think more about it?
2. Do you see Saul's excuses for his disobedience in your own life? How?
3. Does the way in which you repent of your sin include the three characteristics identified on page 102?

1 SAMUEL 16 VERSES 1 TO 23

7. The Shepherd King

In 1 Samuel 8, the people of Israel came to the prophet Samuel to ask for a king like those of the nations. Until then, God had ruled them through Spirit-anointed judges or leaders whom he raised up to deliver them when needed. But the people rejected God's rule; and in doing so, they rejected their identity—their calling by God to be a holy nation, a distinctive people who would display his character to the world. Now they want to be like the nations instead of a light to the nations.

The people of Israel ask for a king and the king they get is Saul. But over the course of chapters 13 – 15, Saul fails badly three times. He is the king Israel asked for, but not the king they need. And so: “Until the day Samuel died, he did not go to see Saul again, though Samuel mourned for him. And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel” (15:35).

The New King

Then the story takes a new turn. There is a new beginning. The effects of this new beginning are still felt among us today. And that new beginning is a new king. “The LORD said to Samuel, ‘How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king’” (16:1).

“Be on your way,” God says to Samuel. Godly ministry is often painful and beset with disappointments. But sooner or later the time for mourning is over. It is time to begin again.

This, as Samuel realises, is treason: “How can I go? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me” (v 2). Declaring someone to be king when the current king still reigns is not going to go down well. The elders of Bethlehem perhaps sense something is afoot, which is why they ask whether Samuel comes in peace (v 4-5). Interestingly, the LORD encourages Samuel to use a form of deception, albeit one that does not involve a straight lie (a tactic David will employ on a number of occasions to avoid confrontation with Saul). Instead of inviting Jesse to a royal anointing, God advises Samuel to invite him to a simple sacrifice (v 2-3).

“When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, ‘Surely the LORD’s anointed stands here before the LORD’” (v 6). Eliab is Jesse’s eldest son, and his tallest son. He is kingly material.

But the book of 1 Samuel opened with the story of a barren woman called Hannah who was mocked by her “rival” (1:5-6), and to whom God gave a child. Hannah’s celebration song set the agenda of the whole of 1 and 2 Samuel; her story was the great picture of how God would work in the next chapter of Israel’s history, and the whole of human history. “Do not keep talking so proudly ... [The LORD] humbles and he exalts,” she sang. “It is not by strength that one prevails” (2:3, 7, 9).

The word “proudly” is the word for height. *Do not keep talking so highly of yourself*, we might say. The same word is used in 9:2 to introduce Saul; describing Saul as a “tall” man is a bad sign to those who listened carefully to Hannah’s song. In 1 Samuel 4 – 7 the issue was weight, echoing the symbolic sense of weight in 1 Samuel 2. In 1 Samuel 8 – 17 the issue is height, echoing the symbolic sense of height in 1 Samuel 2.

So it should come as no surprise that when Samuel sees Eliab, he is told: “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him.”

Why? “The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (16:7). You can imagine the sons of Jesse standing in a line from the tallest downward. To Samuel is it obvious that the tallest one will be king. And if not the tallest, then the next in line. And so on. But one by one they are rejected (v 8-10), until Samuel asks Jesse: “Are these all the sons you have?” (v 11)

There is one more, says Jesse. But he is just a boy—Jesse had not even thought to include him in the line-up. “He is tending the sheep” (v 11). And it is reasonable to conclude that a shepherd boy cannot be king.

But God does not operate by human reason. Jesse sends for him and “had him brought in ... Then the LORD said, ‘Rise and anoint him; this is the one’ (v 12). He is the one Samuel anoints; and he is the one on whom the LORD places his Spirit (v 13). He is David.

This is the one. This shepherd boy will become Israel’s greatest Old Testament king. It is completely unexpected. He is a small boy, from a small place. Bethlehem was one of the least towns in Judah until that day when Samuel turned up with a **heifer** and a horn of oil. But then it became the hometown of Israel’s greatest king.

In the same way, it is reasonable to conclude that nothing good can come from Nazareth (John 1:45-46) or that a carpenter cannot be the Messiah (Mark 6:3). “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2). The point is made explicitly in Matthew 2:1-8, where Matthew quotes from Micah 5:2-4:

*“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.” (Matthew 2:6)*

In the first century, the Jews assumed their king (or “Messiah”) would come from Jerusalem; and the Romans assumed their Caesar (or “Lord”) would

come from Rome. But once again God does not see the world as people see it. Once again an unlikely king would come from insignificant Bethlehem.

Choosing a King

When God told Samuel in 1 Samuel **16:1** to go to Jesse, he said: “I have chosen one of his sons to be king”. In Hebrew, the word “chosen” (*ra’ah*) can also mean “see” or “look”. It is repeated seven times in this chapter: “chosen” (**v 1**), “saw” (**v 6**), “look”, “look” and “looks” (**v 7**), “find” (**v 17**) and “seen” (**v 18**). God says: “I have seen one of his sons”, for God “sees the heart”. In 8:5, the people asked Samuel to anoint a king “for us” (ESV). Samuel refers to him as “your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves” (8:18, ESV). Now God says: “I have provided for myself a king” (**16:1**, ESV).

All this is establishing the principle that God brings low those who are high, and raises up those who are low. Of course, this means those who are high in the sense of proud and low in the sense of humble. But the physical height of Saul and of Eliab symbolises this truth. Eliab is overlooked—and that is not easy when someone is tall! Meanwhile, David is described as the “youngest”, though the word can also mean “smallest” (**v 11**). In Saul’s final encounter with Samuel (or rather, with the ghost of Samuel), we will be told, literally: “Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, filled with fear because of Samuel’s words” (28:20). In contrast, as we shall see, little David will conquer a giant of great height (17:4—again, it is the same root word as 9:2).

So **16:7** is a key verse. “People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” And what he is looking for is humility or lowliness—or maybe even lowness! That is what he finds in David. David is the youngest son. And, while he “had a fine appearance and handsome features” (**v 12**), he was probably at this point the smallest son.

Samuel had to appoint a king. In a sense it is a task we all have. We must choose who will be king over our lives. Who or what will have our ultimate allegiance? It might be a person. It might be an ideology. It might be material possessions. It might be ourselves—our comfort or power or pride. There might be a number of things competing for our allegiance. But something will rule our hearts. How will we decide?

“People look at the outward appearance.” We choose what is impressive, shining, powerful, pleasing. It was ever thus. This is symptomatic of human behaviour from the Garden of Eden onwards. Genesis 3:6 tells us: “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.” Ever since, we have walked by sight and not by faith.

But the good king is not the one who is tallest. The good king is the one with a humble heart. Jesus said: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:28-29). “Humble in heart” is literally: “lowly in heart”. *Submit to my rule, he says, for I am lowly and so my rule is not oppressive. It is light. It is easy. So you will find rest for your souls.*

The Shepherd King

When we first met Saul, he had lost his father’s donkeys (1 Samuel 9:3). He was, as it were, a failed shepherd. When we first meet David, he is “tending the sheep” (16:11). In the next chapter, we will discover what a good shepherd he is as he risks his life to protect the sheep (17:34-37).

When God makes his covenant with David, he says: “I took you from the

pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel” (2 Samuel 7:8; see also 5:2; 24:17). When David became king, his job description did not change. What changed was his flock. He went from shepherding Jesse’s flock of sheep to shepherding God’s flock of people. Jesse didn’t think a shepherd-boy could be chosen as king. But in fact, being a shepherd is what God would call his king to do, even when he sat on a throne instead of in a field.

Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, this picture of shepherd-leadership comes to the fore. In Ezekiel 34, God brings an indictment against Israel’s leaders: “Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?” (Ezekiel 34:2). They have exploited the flock for their own ends, instead of protecting it. “My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them” (v 6)—so God is going to remove these false shepherds. But who can replace them? There can only be one answer: “I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd” (v 23). God promises a new David, the good Shepherd-King.

Mark echoes Ezekiel 34:6 in his explanation of the feeding of the 5,000. “When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, *because they were like sheep without a shepherd*” (Mark 6:34). Jesus is *the* Shepherd-King. David proved he was a good shepherd because he was willing to risk his life for the sheep. Jesus proves he is the ultimate Good Shepherd because he *gives* his life for the sheep: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11).

Here is the king we need. Israel discovered, under first Saul’s and then David’s rule, that the king we decide we want, the king we choose for ourselves, is not the right ruler for us. We need someone who will rule humbly. We need someone who will care for wandering sheep; who will die to protect us. We must all choose a king to rule our hearts, our lives and our futures. Naturally, we choose Saul. But God gives us a Shepherd-King, a

greater David. Being a Christian is not about *having* to live under Jesus' rule. It is about *getting* to live under his humble reign; about the security and joy of knowing that we have the King we need, chosen by the Lord and given to us.

Questions for reflection

1. How do you respond to disappointment, particularly in ministry? Do you need to hear God's words to Samuel in 16:1 and "be on your way" once more?
2. How does the image of Jesus as your Shepherd help you appreciate being part of his people?
3. How will you make sure today that you view Christ's rule as something you get to enjoy, rather than have to endure? When will that be hardest to do?

PART TWO

The Anointed King

“So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David” (1 Samuel **16:13**).

Israelite kings were not crowned with a crown, but anointed with oil. Oil was poured over their heads. So the king was “the anointed one”. The Hebrew word for this is *messiah* and the Greek word is *christos*. Saul had been the anointed one. Now David becomes the anointed one—the messiah or the christ.

After the death of David, as Israel’s kings proved to be false shepherds, the expectation grew that a new king would come, a new anointed one, a messiah. This was fuelled, as we shall see, by God’s covenant with David, promising that one of his sons would always reign over God’s people. A new David, a new messiah, would come to rescue God’s people.

These hopes and promises are fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus is the Christ. That is his job title. In some Welsh villages, where many people shared the same surname, people were often known by their jobs. You might refer to “Dai the Baker” or “Bob the Builder”. Jesus is “Jesus the Christ”. He is the anointed One, the King over God’s people, who rescues us from our enemies.

The Spirit-Anointed King

As David is anointed, we are told that “from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David” (v 13). It is literally: “The Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David”. At the same time, the very next verse tells us: “The Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul” (v 14).

The anointing with oil was symbolic; and these verses suggest it was symbolic of an anointing by the Spirit of God. In the Old Testament, the Spirit came upon people to equip them for specific tasks: to rule, to prophesy or to build. It was task-oriented. In the case of a king, the Spirit provided them with both the authority and the ability to rule. Saul remained God’s anointed king (as David will repeatedly, and at great cost, acknowledge). But without the Spirit, his authority and ability to rule begin to fade.

The departure of God’s Spirit does not represent the removal of Saul’s salvation. Whether Saul was a true (but troubled) believer is hard to discern, though 10:9 does say: “God changed Saul’s heart”. The removal of God’s Spirit is the removal of his anointing to rule; both his authority and his ability to be king over God’s people. Later, when David sins, he will pray: “Restore to me the joy of your salvation” (Psalm 51:12). He is not asking God to restore his salvation, which rests on God’s grace, but to restore his *experience* of that salvation. Yet David also prays: “Do not ... take your Holy Spirit from me” (v 11). Since he is not asking for a restoration of his salvation, his prayer for the Spirit must be a prayer that God will continue to empower him to rule. He knew from first-hand experience of Saul what happens when God withdraws his Spirit-anointing to rule.

What is going on in 1 Samuel 16, though, is different to how the Spirit dwells in other Israelite leaders. Samson was a Spirit-equipped judge: three times we are told that the Spirit rushed upon him (Judges 14:6, 19; 15:14). And three times we are told that the Spirit rushed upon Saul (1 Samuel 10:6, 10; 11:6). Only once are we told that the Spirit rushes on David, but what makes the difference is this: “From that day on the Spirit of the LORD came

powerfully upon David” (**16:13**). The Spirit occasionally came on Samson and Saul, to perform specific leadership tasks. The Spirit was with David “from that day on”, enabling him to rule as God’s anointed king.

It is not just his anointing to rule that Saul loses. From this point, his psychological state begins to unravel. Not only does God withdraw his Spirit, but he sends an evil spirit to torment Saul (**v 14**). The word “evil” can imply both “wickedness” and “misery”. So this is probably not a demonic spirit, but rather a spirit (an angel of judgment perhaps) that brings misery. This is the diagnosis that Saul’s attendants offer him (**v 14-17**). From this point on, Saul becomes emotionally volatile, and as the story unfolds, he becomes increasingly paranoid. The proposed solution—a form of music therapy—leads to David joining the royal court because he is accomplished on the lyre (**v 18-21**).

In contrast to Saul, David’s anointing by the Spirit means he has quickly earned a reputation of being someone with whom the LORD is present. In suggesting David as someone who can calm Saul’s torment, a servant says: “I have seen a son of Jesse of Bethlehem who knows how to play the lyre. He is a brave man and a warrior. He speaks well and is a fine-looking man. And the LORD is with him” (**v 18**). The true king is not the one with a court, but the one with the LORD.

“Saul,” we are told: “liked him very much, and David became one of his armour-bearers” (**v 21**). “Then Saul sent word to Jesse, saying, ‘Allow David to remain in my service, for I am pleased with him’” (**v 22**). David’s music is the only thing that helps Saul (**v 23**).

There is a very real sense in which from this point on Saul adopts David as his son. Later, David will become Saul’s son-in-law, through his marriage to Saul’s daughter. Saul calls David “my son” (24:16; 26:17) and David calls him “my father” (24:11). When Saul says: “Provide for me a man” in **16:17** (ESV), he uses the same word that God uses in 16:1: “I have provided for myself a king” (ESV). Saul provides for himself the man God has provided for himself.

As the history of Israel unfolds, it is not just one king, but the whole institution of kingship that begins to unravel, as the kings turn from God. It soon becomes apparent that David's rule is the high point; and that now lies in history. But, four centuries after David's death, Isaiah promises a new king from the line of Jesse:

*"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—
and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash round his waist." (Isaiah 11:1-5)*

This king will be anointed with the Spirit by God himself. The Spirit will give him the authority and ability to rule with righteousness and faithfulness. The Spirit will give wisdom to make right judgments based on more than appearances.

It is a promise that is fulfilled in Jesus. "When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased'" (Luke 3:21-22). The words from heaven are taken from the covenant that God has made with David in 2 Samuel 7:13-14, once he is seated on the throne of Israel. "I will establish the throne of his kingdom for

ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son.” The events of Jesus’ baptism are a declaration that he is the Davidic king, who will rule for ever over God’s people.

And notice that the Spirit descends to anoint Jesus as God’s messianic King. In the next chapter, Luke describes the Spirit empowering and shaping the ministry of Jesus: “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness” (4:1). “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside” (v 14). Jesus himself, as he interprets what has happened, chooses to use the words of Isaiah 61:1-2:

*“The Spirit of the LORD is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour.” (Luke 4:18-19)*

Jesus is the anointed One, the messianic King, because the Spirit has anointed him.

The Christ and his christs

Jesus is the unique fulfilment of God’s promise of an anointed king. He alone is the Christ with a capital “C”. We are not.

But those who are in Christ share in his identity. In 1 John 2:18-27, John warns his readers of the coming antichrist. Already, he says: “many antichrists have come” (v 18). The spirit of antichrist is already at work in

those who have left the church because they deny the truth about Jesus. And in that context, speaking to Christians, John says:

- “But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth” (v 20).
- “As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him” (v 27).

Remember that the word “christ” means “anointed one”. So, in warning his readers of the “antichrist” and “many antichrists”, John describes his readers as those who have received “an anointing”. They are “anointed ones”—they are “christs” or, as we put it, “Christ-ians”. This is the parallel:

- There is a coming Antichrist with many antichrists with an anointing that is counterfeit.
- There is a coming Christ with many christs with an anointing of the Spirit.

This means every Christian is a christ, an anointed one, anointed by the Spirit to spread the reign of Jesus the Christ.

Imagine an employee wearing the logo or uniform of their company. They act with the authority of that company, and their behaviour affects the reputation of the company. In the same way, we are the representatives of Christ on earth. The Holy Spirit is the sign that we belong to Christ. When we speak of Christ, we speak with his authority; and our behaviour reflects on him. If we do good, then we honour our King. If we do wrong, then we discredit his reputation. We are christs.

Yet we are not the Christ. So while we will love those in need in Christ’s name, and tell them what Christ has done, we cannot and should not try to save them. We point to him, not to ourselves. Our job is to represent Christ, but it is never to replace him.

Questions for reflection

1. How does knowing that Isaiah 11 is, and will be, fulfilled in Jesus encourage you today?
2. How might thinking of yourself as a “christ”, anointed by the Spirit to spread the reign of Jesus the “Christ”, change your view of what you do and say today?
3. “We point to him, not to ourselves.” How might you do this today?

1 SAMUEL 17 VERSES 1 TO 58

8. Facing Giants

We live in a world of gigantic need. How does that make you feel? How do you respond?

Maybe you are like Pauline. Pauline wants to save the world. The badges of all sorts of campaign groups cover her lapels. She tries to keep up to date with environmental issues and poverty issues. She campaigns against multinationals, tries to shop locally, counts food miles, eats organic produce and buys fairly traded products. If someone is in need, then she is quick to help. She opens her home, gives donations and visits the sick. She is exhausting and exhausted. The burden of saving the world is slowly crushing her. However much she does, it never seems enough. In her more honest moments, she recognises that living for others is wearing her out.

Or maybe you're like Sophia. Sophia doesn't have time to save the world. She's struggling to hold her family together. Her husband complains about the children. The children complain about their dad. She's the one in the middle, always trying to make peace, trying to keep everyone happy. But however much she does, it never seems enough. Someone's always shouting at someone.

Or maybe you are like Colin. Colin just shuts it out. *It's not my problem*, he says (when he thinks about it at all). His mission in life is a comfortable life. He cares for his family. But his concern does not extend much further. After all, what can he do about world poverty or global warming? So instead he lives for "me and mine". He works hard and plays hard. And he is successful. But success has proved a bitter pill. However much he gains, it never seems enough. In his more honest moments, he recognises that living for himself

has made him a lesser person.

Facing Giants

In 1 Samuel 17, the people of God face a problem which literally is gigantic—for they face a giant. The Israelites and Philistines are positioned on opposite hills (v 1-3). The Philistines have a champion, Goliath. “His height was six cubits and a span” (v 4)—that is about three metres. The tallest man in recent history was Robert Wadlow (1918-1940) who was 2.72 metres or 8’11”. Goliath was a bit taller—but he was one of the last members of an ancient race of tall men.

Each day Goliath issues a challenge across the valley. He invites Israel to nominate one combatant for winner-takes-all, one-on-one combat. They will fight on behalf of their respective armies and the loser’s nation will be subject to the victor’s (v 8-10). Unsurprisingly “on hearing the Philistine’s words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified” (v 11).

This is not the first time Israel has faced giants—and their track record is not great. God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt and led them to the verge of the promised land of Canaan. In Numbers 13, Moses sent twelve spies ahead into Canaan to explore the land. *It is a land flowing with milk and honey*, they reported. But ten of them concluded: “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are ... The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the **Nephilim** there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them” (Numbers 13:31-33).

The other two spies, Caleb and Joshua, argued that “the LORD ... will give it to us” (Numbers 14:8). But the people as a whole feared the giants and

refused to enter the land. As a result, the glory of the LORD appeared among the people. God told Moses he would wipe out the Israelites, and start again with Moses. But Moses spoke for the people, calling on God to defend his reputation and remember his mercy. So instead God declared that, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua, the whole generation that came out of Egypt would die in the wilderness. He would only give the land to the next generation. So for forty years, the people of Israel wandered in the desert under God's judgment while a generation died out.

Now, in 1 Samuel 17, the Philistines have encroached deep into Israelite territory. **Verse 1** specifically tells us they are "in Judah". They have, in effect, undone the conquest of the land achieved under Joshua. It's as if they are back in the wilderness, back in the place where Israel was cowed by giants. And one of those giants has returned. When Joshua conquered the **Anakim**, the Anakim relocated to Gaza, Gath and Ashdod. Gath is Goliath's home town; and so he was probably descended from the Anakim.

Israel had feared to enter the land because of giants. As a result they spent forty years in the wilderness. Now Goliath has taunted Israel every morning and evening for forty days (**v 16**). Forty years—forty days: it is no coincidence. Saul was a giant in Israel (9:2). But without the Spirit, he has become like Israel in the wilderness. While "the Philistines gathered their armies for battle" (**active voice**), "Saul and the men of Israel were gathered" (**passive voice**) (**17:1-2**, ESV). There is no proactive leadership. For forty days, Goliath provokes Israel. This is their time of testing and again they fail. To them, the giant is unbeatable. The sight of him makes them flee (**v 24**).

But then David comes on the scene, like a new Joshua and Caleb, confident that God's people can defeat giants (as they did before). **Verses 12-15** explain that David now splits his time between serving in Saul's court and tending sheep in Bethlehem). In this latter capacity, his father sends him with provisions for his three eldest brothers, who are serving in the army (**v 17-20**). Jesse says David's brothers are "fighting against the Philistines" (**v 19**); but we know they are far from fighting the Philistines. They are caught in a tense stand-off, "dismayed and terrified" (**v 11**). As the armies draw up

opposite each other (**v 21**), David leaves his provisions with “the keeper of the baggage and [runs] to the ranks” (**v 22**, ESV). In contrast to Saul, who hid “among the baggage” (10:22, ESV), David is ready for action.

While David is in the camp, Goliath repeats his challenge, but this time there is a difference: “David heard it” (**17:23**). So David asks what reward will be given to the man who takes up Goliath’s challenge (**v 25-27**). When his brother Eliab gets wind of his questions, he rebukes David (**v 28**). It is a very domestic scene. And the ultimate Christ would face the same kind of questioning from those who grew up with him (Matthew 13:55-57). David responds with words all too reminiscent of modern families. “Now what have I done? ... Can’t I even speak?” (1 Samuel **17:29**) Just as Jesus would be, David is scorned by his own family (**v 28**; Mark 3:20-21). “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:11).

David persists with his questions (1 Samuel **17:30**). And news reaches Saul, who sends for him (**v 31**). Picture the tall, yet virtually defeated king with this young, small shepherd-boy standing in front of him. *Don’t lose heart*, says the smaller of the men: “Your servant will go and fight him” (**v 32**).

As an aside, at the end of the chapter Saul asks Abner, the commander of the army: “Whose son is that young man?” (**v 55**). Abner does not know—but why does Saul not recognise David, when David has already been in his service (16:17-23)?! In fact, Saul does not ask who David is, but whose *son* he is (**v 55-58**). This is because, in **verse 25**, Saul says he will give his daughter to anyone who can defeat Goliath, and will “exempt” that man’s family from tax obligations. In **verses 25-31**, we see David clarifying that reward at some length. So it is not that Saul does not recognise him. Instead, Saul inquires after David’s family so he can fulfil his commitment to reward them as promised. There is no suggestion when David first volunteers for his services that Saul does not recognise him.

So David asks to be made the representative of Israel, her champion against her enemies. David has been anointed by the Spirit as the king of Israel. Now he wants to be appointed as the champion of Israel. If he is to be

the true king of Israel, then he must face his time of testing. It is going to be a theme over the coming chapters. And it starts with a giant.

Crushing the Snake

But Goliath is not simply a giant. He is also a snake. The writer shows uncharacteristic interest in Goliath's armour (**v 5-7**). Elsewhere he rarely describes someone's armour. But Goliath's armour matters and not just because it is a sign of his great size. We are told that Goliath wears "scale armour" (**v 5**). It is literally just "scales". Goliath has scales. Goliath is presented to us as a snake.

In 1 Samuel 11 Saul faced Nahash—"snake"—the Ammonite in battle. After being anointed and before being acclaimed as king, Saul faced a snake. Now David must face a snake, too. He faces a test that will prove his suitability as king. (Of course, we are meant to ask why Saul will not lead his people into battle by fighting Goliath. That is the king they had wanted; that is the king Saul was in chapter 11. But now the Spirit has left him.)

In response to Saul's understandable scepticism of David's ability to take on a giant (**17:33**), David points to his victories over wild animals (**v 34-37**). He refuses Saul's armour because he is not used to it (**v 38-39**). Instead he goes out to face Goliath with the weapons of a shepherd. We are specifically told he wears a "shepherd's bag" (**v 40**). David is going out to tame an animal (**v 43**).

In the Garden of Eden, Adam was to rule over the beasts. But Adam was defeated by the snake. Now the latest manifestation (or representative) of the snake stands before David, defying God's people and wielding the power of death (**v 44**).

In the wilderness Israel was to rule over the giants. But Israel was defeated

by their fear of the Nephilim giants, and spent forty years in the wilderness. Now after forty days, one of the descendants of the Nephilim stands before David.

And David triumphs (v **48-50**). Unlike Adam and unlike Israel, David proves himself faithful. God had said to the snake in Genesis 3:15: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” Now David defeats Goliath with a head wound (1 Samuel **17:49**).

David crushes the snake and he brings down the giant. “[The LORD] brings low and he exalts,” sang Hannah (2:7, ESV). Saul, the king who is taller than anyone else, is being brought low. Eliab, the tall brother, is being confounded (16:6-7; **17:28-29**). When Samuel anointed David, God told him that the choice was not about appearance or height, but the heart (16:7). Now the tallest man in history is brought low. He falls down to the ground (**17:49**). The lesson of chapter 16, that we should not judge by appearance, applies not only to our choices, but also to our enemies.

Saul’s armour reveals him to be *a king like those of the nations*. He is the king the people asked for so he could protect them from their enemies. But he cannot protect them. His problem is that he shares Goliath’s perspective; he believes that power is found in armour and weapons. Instead, God’s newly anointed one faces the enemies of God’s people without the trappings of *a king like those of the nations*.

But more importantly, David is the christ—the prototype of and pointer to Jesus the Christ. As we have seen, in Luke 3:21-22, Jesus is anointed by the Spirit as the King-designate. He then goes out, in Luke 4:1-11, into the wilderness to face the snake. This is David and Goliath revisited. This is Israel in the wilderness revisited. This is Adam in the garden revisited. Jesus is the true son of David, the true son of Abraham and the true son of Adam (3:31, 34, 38).

What we see in the Valley of Elah is a miniature version of the victory of

Jesus. Jesus is the true Adam, crushing the snake and taming the beasts. Jesus is the true Israel, trusting God, defeating giants and securing our inheritance. Mark 1:13 says Jesus “was in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.” Jesus faced the snake in the wilderness and returned in the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:14) to proclaim the good news of freedom to his oppressed people (v 18-19).

When we face temptation, we are called to follow the example of the Christ. We are to respond with faith rather than fear. We are to resist the snake. But our ultimate hope is not in our ability to follow the example of Jesus. Only Jesus is consistently faithful. First and foremost we do not follow the Christ as our example—rather, we trust in Jesus as our Saviour. He is the faithful One, and we are faithful in him. When temptation comes, we seek to resist like Jesus. But when we succumb to temptation (and we will), we can look to Jesus. We can remind ourselves that God considers us faithful because we are in Christ, the faithful One.

Questions for reflection

1. Do you see yourself as following the Christ who has crushed the devil and defeated death? How does this affect your thinking and emotions about your life?
2. What will it look like in your life to respond to temptation and opposition with faith rather than fear?
3. How would you use the story of David and Goliath to explain the gospel of Jesus Christ to a non-Christian?

PART TWO

Finding Ourselves in the Story

As David cuts off the giant's head (1 Samuel **17:51**) and the Philistines turn and run, with Israel chasing and plundering them (**v 52-53**), the question we are left with is: *who are we in the story?*

It is perhaps tempting to think we are called to be like David, going into battle against the giants that plague our lives. It is a dangerous temptation. If this story encourages you to take on your local bully, you may find the outcome persuades you to adopt an alternative interpretation!

Let me tell you about the time I met the messiah. A woman who had been attending our church turned up one evening on our doorstep with her two young children. She had been the victim of domestic violence, and her former partner had recently been released from prison. Now he was pursuing her and she had come to us for sanctuary. Quick as a flash, my wife pulled her into the house and pushed me out. "I'll deal with her," she said. "You deal with him." So there I was minutes later, standing outside my house with no shoes on my feet, talking to a big, angry man. If that was not disturbing enough, as we talked it became clear that he thought he was the messiah returned to earth, and that the reason he had been imprisoned was that he was being persecuted. By God's grace I was able to calm him down and persuade him to leave.

It is the only time I have met someone who claimed to be the messiah. But I have met many more people who acted as if they were a messiah-figure, as if they were the saviour of the world or of themselves or of their family.

Indeed, I have been one of those people myself, many times. Of course, such people often do a lot of good. But sooner or later, a messiah-complex will crush you or it will crush the people around you.

The message of the Bible is not that we are called to save the world. Its message is that we have a Saviour. The message of 1 Samuel 17 is not that we are called to be like David. Its good news is that we have a David.

You Didn't Win the Victory

Who are we in the story? The truth is that often we are Eliab. We do not trust our Christ to deliver us from the snake.

Or perhaps we are Israel. Imagine yourself as one of the Israelite soldiers on the hillside above the Valley of Elah. For forty days, Goliath has been coming out each morning and evening to taunt you, and you feel powerless to do anything. At some point this is going to end, and it does not look as if it will end well. Then David steps forward. It does not look good. Goliath walks towards him (**v 41**); and David looks so small compared to the giant, “little more than a boy” (**v 42**). Generations ago, the ten spies had said the giants of Canaan made them look like grasshoppers; and today David again looks like a grasshopper. If this is all you have, then you have nothing, surely.

But then David loads his slingshot and in a sudden blur it is all over. Goliath lies fallen on the field and David is cutting his head off with his own sword. On the opposite hillside, the jeering Philistines are silenced; and then they start to run (**v 51**). Then, with your fellow men of Israel and Judah, you surge forward with a shout to pursue them and plunder the camp (**v 52-53**).

In the same way, we, as it were, stand on the hillside, surveying the story of history. Down in the valley we see our Christ, Jesus, entering the battle armed only with a beam of wood strapped to his shoulders. We see him face

the snake who has tyrannised our lives, as he hangs on the cross. There is Jesus, like David, appearing small compared to the might of the Roman Empire, appearing weak compared to the power of the snake. But he enters the battle bravely. He entrusts himself to God.

We see him saying, in effect, what David said: *You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, with lies and threats and accusations, with sin and law and death. But I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, whom you have defied. This day you may strike my heel, but the LORD will hand you over to me, and I will crush your head.*

As we look, we see defeat turn into victory as Jesus bursts from the tomb. The snake is defeated. His head is crushed. “The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient snake called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray,” as John puts it in Revelation 12:9.

In **verses 4** and **23**, Goliath is described as a “champion”. John Woodhouse says:

“the word translated ‘champion’ literally means ‘the man of the between’.”

(Woodhouse, 1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader, page 305)

Goliath stands between the Philistines and Israel. And he literally says in **verse 8**: “Am I not the Philistine?” He is the embodiment of Philistine manhood, the true Philistine, their representative.

David becomes Israel’s champion. He is their representative, their man in between, the true Israelite. The people had asked for a king to fight for them, and they got Saul. But Saul is as dismayed as the rest of them. It is David who stands between Israel and their enemies. What is at stake is not just David’s future, but Israel’s future (**v 8-9**). The outcome of his battle will be their outcome. They did not fight; they watched. But their future hung on David’s shoulders as he walked out to face Goliath.

In the same way, on the cross Jesus was our Champion, our man of the in between. He stood between us and judgment, between us and death.

Judgment and death bear down on us with violent force, threatening to destroy us. But Jesus has stood in between. He bore the full force of their fury. Our future hung on his shoulders as he hung on the cross.

The Robert Robinson (1735-1790) hymn *Come, thou Fount of every blessing* contains the lines (sadly often changed in modern versions):

*Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger,
Interposed his precious blood.*

Jesus interposed himself between me and the judgment of God. Like David, he was chosen by God to be the man in between: to defeat death, and kill it, and give us the victory.

Saul and the Israelites are “dismayed and terrified” by the taunts of Goliath (v 11). But David says: “Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him” (v 32). We need not fear, because our Champion fights on our behalf. On the night Jesus was born, the angel told the shepherds: “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11). The message of the Gospels is: *Do not lose heart for our David is here and he has come to fight on our behalf. He has taken on sin, death and Satan, and he has won a great victory.*

And so now the time has come to surge forward with a shout and plunder the camp of Satan (1 Samuel 17:52-53). He has been cast down and bound. It is time to surge down the hillside and proclaim victory, to call those who once belonged to Satan to freedom in Christ through the gospel.

Enjoy the Victory

There is a call to action in this chapter, but it is not a call to take on giants. Jesus is David. We are not the Christ. But, as we saw when we looked at 1 Samuel 16, we are small-c christs. We are Christ-ians, anointed by the Spirit to proclaim Christ's victory. We are called to imitate the Christ and follow the example of David's faith.

Saul and the Israelites are "dismayed and terrified" by the taunts of Goliath (17:11). But David is offended by those taunts. Six times in the chapter, we are told that Goliath defies or disgraces Israel (v 10, 25, twice in v 26, 36, 45). Four of these mentions come from the mouth of David. David is passionate about the honour of the LORD. "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" he asks (v 26). Goliath has committed blasphemy; that was a capital offence that demanded death by stoning. And stoning is precisely what David goes out to do.

Saul is a king like those of the nations, wearing armour like Goliath. Throughout the rest of the story he is never far from a spear—just like Goliath. But David is a king under God, relying on God's power for victory. He marches out against Goliath without armour because he is protected by God. He plunders Goliath's armour and puts his weapons "in his own tent" (v 54)—a sign that the victory belongs to him. But in 21:9, we discover that Goliath's sword is in the sanctuary. At some point David has given the plunder to God—a sign that the victory belongs to the LORD.

Perhaps the key moment in the whole story is David's speech to Goliath. It is worth reading in full: "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hands, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands" (17:45-47).

“It is not by strength that one prevails,” sang Hannah in 2:9. It is one of the key themes of the book; nowhere do we see it more clearly than in this story. David is brave before Goliath because he has learned that “it is not by strength that one prevails”. He believes that “the battle is the LORD’s”.

The same truth applies to Christians. For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, [our weapons] have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

As he convinces Saul that “your servant will go and fight” Goliath (1 Samuel **17:32**), David describes how he “rescued the sheep” (**v 35**) because “the LORD ... rescued me” (**v 37**). Now he will rescue Israel because God will rescue him. David encourages us to remember how God has delivered us in our personal histories, and ultimately through the cross and resurrection. It is the same logic as Romans 8:32: “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”

After the death of Goliath, there is still a job to be done (1 Samuel **17:52**). The men of Israel and Judah “surged forward with a shout” to pursue the Philistines and plunder their camp (**v 52-53**) There is a battle, but they fight knowing that the decisive action has been accomplished (**v 45-47**). It is the same today. The decisive victory has been won through the cross and resurrection. The snake is bound and our job is to plunder his camp, as we proclaim the victory of Christ and call people to submit to his liberating reign. It is a battle. We often find ourselves facing the hostility and scorn that David faced (**v 10, 43-44**). But we can fight bravely because the victory is ours in Christ. We can have faith because of the faithfulness of our Champion.

Christ says to us: *Let no one lose heart on account of this snake; I have gone and fought him.* And we can say: *It is not by sword or spear that the Lord*

saves; for the battle is the LORD'S.

So we are not called to be like Pauline or Sophia, wearing ourselves out as we vainly attempt to save the world. We are not to act as if everything depends on us. In our evangelism or our family life or our campaigning, we can think that we must win the victory; we can take on the weight of the world. But sooner or later it will crush us. It will drive us to endless activity because we can never do enough to save the world. Or it will crush those around us, as we project guilt onto others because they are not saving the world along with us, or because they are not responding to being “saved” as they should.

But neither are we called to be like Colin, indifferent to the needs of the world. Our job is to surge forward in the wake of Christ's triumph, to proclaim the victory he has won. Maybe you are like the Israelite army, watching the action from the sidelines rather than getting involved. Perhaps you feel “dismayed and terrified”. Look at the battlefield. The time has come to surge forward with a shout and plunder the camp of Satan. He has been cast down and bound. It is time to surge down the hillside and proclaim victory, to call those who belong to Satan to freedom in Christ through the gospel. “The battle is the LORD'S.” The victory is Christ's; and, through him, it is ours.

Questions for reflection

1. Do you really see Jesus as your only hope for liberation from death, as Israel viewed David when he walked towards Goliath?
2. Meditate on the truth that Jesus is our “man of the in between”. How does this move you to praise and worship him?
3. Are you most like Pauline, Sophia or Colin? How does knowing that Jesus has won the battle both liberate and challenge you?

1 SAMUEL 18 VERSE 1 TO 20 VERSE 42

9. Taking Sides

One of the things our family likes to do when we have visitors from other countries is offer them a taste of Marmite. Marmite, for those who do not know, is a spread made from yeast extract which you put on toast. It has a very distinctive flavour. For the uninitiated the first bite is always a surprise. Its advertising slogan is a bit of a giveaway: *Marmite: you either love it or hate it.*

The same could be said of David in these chapters: *David: you either love him or hate him.* And most people love him; but not everyone.

Old Heir, New Heir

Immediately after the Philistines have been routed: “Jonathan [Saul’s son] became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself.” (**18:1**). “One in spirit” is literally “knitted together”. The same word is used to describe Jacob’s relationship with Benjamin, his favourite son. Jacob’s life, we are told was “closely bound up [or knitted together] with the boy’s life” (Genesis 44:30). And so it will be for Jonathan and David. David essentially becomes part of Saul’s family, as well as of his court (1 Samuel **18:2**)

It’s easy to think of David and Jonathan as of similar ages—but they weren’t. David was thirty when he became king (2 Samuel 5:4). Saul reigned for forty years (Acts 13:21). So David must have been born in the tenth year

of Saul's reign. Jonathan was already fighting with Saul during the third year of his father's reign (1 Samuel 13:1, see footnote); and an Israelite soldier needed to be at least 20 (Numbers 1:3). So in the tenth year of Saul's reign, when David was born, Jonathan must have been at least 27.

This means that Jonathan is old enough to be David's father. And Jonathan is royalty, while David is a peasant farmer. Jonathan was once destined for the throne, while David is his replacement. There are many reasons why Jonathan might resent David. And yet Jonathan loves David like a younger brother.

The love between Jonathan and David is so strong (1 Samuel **18:1, 3-4**; see page 141 for more on v 3-4) that some people have suggested it was a homosexual relationship. But this lacks **credibility**. Homosexuality was clearly forbidden by God's law (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13). The writer of Samuel is not afraid to highlight David's sin. But he gives no indication of any law-breaking in their relationship. Either he was ignorant of the sin, or he covered it up—neither of which is likely given his exposé of David's adultery with Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 – 12. The suggestion of homosexuality probably reveals more about the sexualisation of our culture than it does about their relationship. The reality is that men can have an intimate and affectionate friendship without it becoming sexual, especially when they are comrades in arms.

The Soldiers, the Women and David

"Whatever mission Saul sent him on, David was so successful that Saul gave him a high rank in the army. This pleased all the troops, and Saul's officers as well" (1 Samuel **18:5**). The army loves David—both the rank and file and the top brass.

And the women of Israel love him, too. After Goliath is killed and the Philistines are routed, as the men of the army return triumphantly with King Saul at their head, the women greet them “with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lyres. As they danced, they sang: ‘Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands’” (**v 6-7**). We have seen how Saul’s rise to the throne included participation in a quasi-marriage feast in 1 Samuel 9. As king he was becoming, as it were, the husband of Israel. But it is David who is now recognised as the true husband of God’s people, protecting the women from threat. It is an unconscious pointer to Jesus, the ultimate Husband, who gives his life for his bride, the church (Ephesians 5:22-33).

By 1 Samuel **18:16**, it is “David [who] led them in their campaigns”, and so “all Israel and Judah loved” him. Leading God’s people in their battles was supposed to be Saul’s role (9:16), but now it is David who is doing it, and being loved for it.

Put simply, David is a success. He does everything he is asked to do with great success (**18:5**), more success than any other officer (**v 30**). But David is not simply a good fighter. The key is that the LORD is with him. “In everything he did he had great success, because the LORD was with him” (**v 14**; see also **v 28**). Even more significant is **verse 12**: “The LORD was with David but had departed from Saul”.

One Man Doesn’t Love David

Everyone loves David... except Saul. When the women of Israel sing: “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands” (**v 7**), it is unlikely their song intentionally exalts David above Saul. Hebrew poetry often pairs items, and the word “thousands” is literally “**myriads**” (perhaps implying that between them Saul and David have slain “loads of people”). But

nevertheless, Saul takes it as a slight. “Saul was very angry,” we are told. Why? “They have credited David with tens of thousands,” he thought, “but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?” (v 8). Saul is clearly jealous of David, and starts keeping “a close eye on David” (v 9).

But not only is he jealous. He is also afraid—and this fear grows through the chapter. He is “afraid of David, because the LORD was with David but had departed from Saul” (v 12); and because “Saul saw how successful he was, [and so] he was afraid of him” (v 15). Not only that, but when he sees how “his daughter Michal loved David, Saul became still more afraid of him, and he remained his enemy for the rest of his days” (v 28-29). Saul does not only not love David; he hates him.

The process towards hatred begins with his anger at the song in **verses 8-9**. And “the next day an evil spirit from God came forcefully on Saul” (v 10). It literally “rushes” on him, just as God’s Spirit had once come powerfully upon him (11:6), but now “rushed” on David (16:13). And this bad spirit now causes him to be “prophesying in his house” (18:10). “Prophesying” in 1 Samuel seems to refer to more than simply speaking God’s word. It seems it can include any effect that comes from being overcome by a spirit (as we shall see again in chapter 19). Here, it involves throwing a spear at David—twice (18:11)! Saul’s deep-seated **antipathy** towards David, which is perhaps restrained by the **etiquette** of court, is unrestrained when he is “prophesying”.

David eludes the spear; so, in growing fear of him (v 12), Saul sends him away to the front line (v 13). But everything David does is a success and prompts growing love from Israel and fear in Saul (v 14-16). So Saul comes up with a plan. “‘Here is my elder daughter Merab. I will give her to you in marriage; only serve me bravely and fight the battles of the LORD.’ For Saul said to himself, ‘I will not raise a hand against him. Let the Philistines do that!’” (v 17). In other words, Saul encourages David with the promise of his daughter to fight with reckless ambition, in the hope that he will be killed. Envy is the mother of malice and gives birth to murder.

David responds with humility and refuses to marry her, on the basis that he is not fit to be Saul's son-in-law (**v 18-19**). It might be a shrewd awareness of Saul's intentions, but the way events unfold suggests it is a genuine humility.

Then Saul discovers someone else who loves David, his second daughter Michal (**v 20**). So Saul revives his plan (**v 21**). David responds with the same deference (**v 22-23**). So Saul comes up with a challenge for David. David can earn the right to his daughter's hand by securing the foreskins of 100 (dead) Philistines (**v 24-25**). David is forcibly to "convert" 100 uncircumcised Philistines whose presence defiles God's land.

David accepts the challenge and succeeds (**v 26-27**). Indeed, he provides Saul with 200 foreskins. Saul's plan has spectacularly backfired. He is worse off than when he started, for now David is part of the royal house and his reputation is further enhanced (**v 28-30**). By this stage, Saul sees David as an enemy.

Three Murder Plots

Chapter 19 sees three more attempts to get rid of David. None work. First, Jonathan saves him. When trying to trap David, Saul had told his servants to say: "Behold, the king has delight in you" (**18:22**, ESV). But it is a lie. The reality is that it is his son, Jonathan, who "delight[s] much in David" (**19:1**, ESV). Jonathan warns David that his father is looking to kill him (**v 2**). But he offers to intercede (**v 3**). He proclaims David's innocence (**v 4**). He diplomatically points out that it is "the LORD" who "won a great victory for all Israel" (**v 5**). Through Jonathan's mediation, Saul and David are reconciled and David is restored to the royal court (**v 6-7**).

But it does not last long. After further success in battle (**v 8**), Saul's jealousy seems to be provoked again. Once more, a bad spirit comes on Saul, and

again he attempts to spear David (**v 9-10**). David “struck” the Philistines in **verse 8**; The same word is used twice in **verse 10** to describe how Saul, in his attempt to “pin” David to the wall, “drove” the spear into it. Saul is treating David like an enemy Philistine.

David escapes to his house. But Saul sends men to surround the house. In **verse 1**, Saul plotted to kill David “but Jonathan” intervened. The pattern is now repeated, but this time with Michal. Saul plots to kill David “but Michal” intervenes (**v 11**). She organises David’s escape from a window, gives him time to make good his escape by hiding an idol in a bed to give the impression that David is sick (**v 12-16**), and covers herself by claiming David threatened her (**v 17**). Both times, Saul’s plan has been thwarted by his own children.

Lastly, Samuel saves David. Now in fear of his life, David escapes to the prophet (**v 18**). But Saul sends men to capture David (**v 19-20**). God rules through his word. So here, God’s king and God’s word are going head to head. And when that happens, there is only ever one winner. Ultimate authority does not lie with the king, but with the word of God.

So as they approach David, Saul’s men encounter a group of prophets led by Samuel—and they get caught up in the prophesying (**v 20**). Round One to God’s word! The same thing happens two more times (**v 21**)—Rounds Two and Three to God’s word. Finally Saul goes himself (**v 22**) “but the Spirit of God came even on him, and he walked along prophesying until he came to Naioth. He stripped off his garments, and he too prophesied in Samuel’s presence. He lay naked all that day and all that night” (**v 23-24**). Round Four, and the victory, to God’s word.

It is not exactly clear what happened to Saul and his men. The word “prophesying” is often used of a prophet giving a word from God. But it can also describe a frenzy—as we saw in **v 10-11**, Saul’s “prophesying” involved hurling a spear at David. The implication is that “prophesying” involves coming under the influence of a spirit. That might be the Spirit of God and lead to prophesying in the sense of proclaiming God’s word, but it might also

lead to a **frenetic** loss of control. This loss of control is what happens to Saul.

In chapter 10 Saul met a band of prophets and got caught up in their prophesying. We read: “When all those who had formerly known him saw him prophesying with the prophets, they asked each other, ‘What is this that has happened to the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?’” (10:11). It was a cry of wonder and praise. Now something similar has happened again—Saul has once more been caught up with a band of prophets. But instead of empowering him, his “prophesying” has disempowered him so that he cannot fulfil his plan to murder David. Again “people say, ‘Is Saul also among the prophets?’” (19:24). But it is not a cry of praise. It is a cry of scorn.

Saul is becoming a **parody** of his former self. Saul, the asked-for king of chapters 13 – 19, is a parody of the Spirit-empowered judge of chapters 9 – 11. And in chapter 19, Saul repeats his rise to kingship in parody form. Back in chapters 9 – 11, his rise to kingship went like this:

1. He comes to Ramah (9:6).
2. He comes to a well and asks for directions to find Samuel (v 11).
3. He prophesies with a group of prophets (10:5-6).
4. People marvel: “Is Saul also among the prophets?” (v 12).
5. The Spirit comes on Saul and invests him with authority (11:6).

The same sequence is now repeated in chapter 19, but in tragicomic form:

1. Saul comes to Ramah (19:22).
2. He comes to a well and asks for directions to find Samuel (v 22).
3. He prophesies with a group of prophets (v 23).
4. People joke: “Is Saul also among the prophets?” (v 24).
5. The Spirit comes on Saul and divests him of his clothes (v 24).

At the end of chapter 19, King Saul is a pathetic figure of fun, lying naked on the floor. And so Saul is unable to carry out his intent to capture David. David is saved by Samuel—or rather David is saved by the God of Samuel.

I wonder if you recognise Saul closer to home. Maybe there is someone in your workplace who manoeuvres for power or prestige. Maybe there is someone in your church who envies the success of others. Maybe there is someone in your family whose insecurities mean they constantly compare themselves to others. Maybe that person is you. Trusting God makes all the difference. If we glory in God, then we do not need to manoeuvre for prestige, nor will we envy the success of others. If we find identity in Christ, then how we compare with others or what they think will not matter.

Questions for reflection

1. The Bible encourages close, trusting, honest friendships between Christians of the same sex. How could you cultivate that kind of friendship?
2. Do you recognise anything of Saul in yourself? How will finding your identity, security and sense of worth in your relationship with Jesus change your heart?
3. Are there any ways in which you are being called to courageously disobey an authority in order to obey God?

PART TWO

The Threat

The uncertainty surrounding David's place in the royal court comes to a head in chapter 20. Saul's attitude to David is hardening, and David must decide whether it is safe for him to stay. It seems that, initially, Jonathan is blind to the extent of his father's hatred (**v 2-3**). So, between them, David and Jonathan come up with a plan to reveal Saul's intentions (**v 4-7**). The new moon festival was clearly a key festival, which members of the royal court were expected to attend. So they decide that David should deliberately absent himself. If Saul accepts his absence, then that will show that Saul is still well disposed towards David. But if Saul gets angry, then the threat to David will be confirmed. Whether this plan is for David's benefit or Jonathan's is unclear. Perhaps it is a bit of both. David reaffirms his innocence, inviting Jonathan personally to kill him there and then if he has been guilty of treachery (**v 8-9**).

But how will David know what Saul's reaction is (**v 10**)? The two men go out into a field, perhaps to escape being overheard (**v 11**). There, Jonathan asks David to make a covenant with him. He commits to doing all he has promised, and to protecting David; he asks David to commit to him with *hesed* ("kindness"—**v 12-14**). Then they work out the details of how Jonathan will get word to David, through a complicated archery routine (**v 18-23**).

Perhaps this is a reiteration of the covenant they made in **18:3-4**, the contents of which were not specified. David is on the run from Saul but the first place he goes to is the home of Saul's son, Jonathan (**20:1**). It is an

extraordinary move. But David can trust Jonathan because of their covenant (**18:3**). As he says: “As for you, show kindness to your servant, for you have brought him into a covenant with you before the LORD” (**20:8**). The word “kindness” is *hesed*. It means love and compassion, but it also has the sense of loyalty and faithfulness, so it is often translated “steadfast love”. This is a love undergirded by covenant commitment.

The chapter begins with David under threat from the house of Saul. But throughout the rest of the chapter, Jonathan recognises that really it is the house of Saul which is under threat from David. He sees that it is God’s will that David will become king and triumph over his enemies (**v 15**). This is why he makes David promise to spare his descendants (**v 16-17, 23**).

So “the New Moon feast came, and the king sat down to eat” (**v 24**). Saul sees David’s empty place, but thinks nothing of it. He assumes David must be ceremonially unclean (**v 25-26**). But David is again absent on the second day of the festival; and this time his absence provokes questions (**v 27**). Saul asks Jonathan why David is missing and, as agreed, Jonathan tells his father that David has asked permission to attend a family sacrifice (**v 28-29**). His speech, though, is laden with irony. He reports David as saying: “If I have found favour in your eyes, let me go to see my brothers” (**v 29**). The phrase translated “let me go” is translated “escape” in **19:10, 12, 17, 18** and “run for your life” in **19:11**. The real reason for David’s absence is right there in Jonathan’s excuse.

Saul’s response leaves no room for doubt. “Saul’s anger flared up,” we are told: “and he said to him, ‘You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don’t I know that you have sided with the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of the mother who bore you? As long as the son of Jesse lives on this earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established. Now send someone to bring him to me, for he must die!’” (**20:30-31**)

Saul twice refers to David as “the son of Jesse” (**v 27, 30**), a phrase intended to demean him. He cannot bring himself to say David’s name and implies instead that he is the son of a nobody (in contrast, perhaps, to

Jonathan, the son of a king). In his anger, he calls Jonathan a “son of a perverse and rebellious woman!” The irony, of course, is that Jonathan is actually the son of a perverse and rebellious *man*... The phrase “the shame of the mother who bore you” (**v 30**) or “to the shame of your mother’s nakedness” (ESV) normally refers to someone’s genitals (Genesis 9:22; Leviticus 18:6; 20:17; Ezekiel 16:8). Saul is using coarse language in this attack on Jonathan.

And Saul’s mind about David is made up. “He must die” (1 Samuel **20:31**) is literally he is “a son of death”. *He is dead to me*, we might say. Why? Because Saul knows that as long as David lives, Jonathan will not reign (**v 31**).

No Turning Back

This is a key moment in the narrative. In **19:1-7**, Jonathan was able to mediate between Saul and David, and so bring them together. But mediation is no longer possible. This is the point where Jonathan must choose. Saul accuses him of siding with David (**20:30**). It is decision time.

Jonathan chooses David. “What has he done?” (**v 32**) echoes David’s own question in verse 1. Saul responds by hurling his spear at Jonathan (**v 33**), just as he has done twice to David (**18:10-11**; **19:9-10**). The message is clear: Jonathan is with David, and so Saul treats Jonathan like he treats David.

As promised, Jonathan goes through his archery routine to let David know he is in danger (**20:35-40**). The two men part, weeping (**v 41**)—they don’t know if they will ever meet again. The chapter ends with Jonathan saying to David: “Go in peace” (**20:42**). There is peace between Jonathan and David. But it has come at the price of hostility between Jonathan and Saul. **Verse 30** says: “Saul’s anger flared up at Jonathan”, and **verse 34** says: “Jonathan got

up from the table in fierce anger”. There was no alternative. There can be no **accommodation**. Jonathan had to choose between peace with David and peace with his father.

David is the christ who points to the Christ. Jesus, David’s greater Son, has come among us. And so we have to choose. There is no alternative. There can be no accommodation. We have to choose, just as Jonathan did. We have to choose between peace with the Christ and peace with our families, peace with our friends, peace with our culture. For many of us, that choice is not as stark as it was for Jonathan. Some of us have Christian parents. But many people in our world choose to follow Jesus, knowing their choice will mean rejection by their families. Jesus himself said: “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37). To side with Jesus can mean siding against our families. To side with Jesus will always mean difficult decisions.

Recognising the King

These chapters contrast the attitudes of Saul and Jonathan to David. Saul is jealous of David (1 Samuel **18:8**) and suspicious of David (**v 9**). We are repeatedly told that Saul is afraid of David (**v 12, 15, 29**). His murderous intent is clear to all (**19:1**). In contrast, Jonathan is “one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself” (**18:1**). He intercedes for David and betrays his father to save David. The phrase “one in spirit” is used by Saul to describe conspiracy in 22:8 and v 13. Jonathan’s loyalty to David inevitably sets him on a trajectory that will end in disloyalty towards his father.

The relationship between David and Jonathan is often taken as a model of friendship. But it is really a model of discipleship. Jonathan loves David as a brother. But he also (and more importantly) recognises him as a king.

Saul is rejected in 1 Samuel 13. But immediately a replacement is introduced in chapter 14: Jonathan. He proves himself a worthy successor. But before he is even introduced, he is ruled out by his father's sin (13:16).

This gives great significance to the bond between Jonathan and David: "Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt" (18:4). Jonathan is not just sharing his coat because David is cold! This act is laden with political significance. Back in chapter 15, when Saul was rejected as king, he grabbed at Samuel's robe and tore it. In response, Samuel said: "The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbours—to one better than you" (15:28). So when Jonathan gives his robe to David, he is giving him his kingdom. Jonathan is taking off his right to be king and handing it to David.

Imagine a prince giving someone his crown, robe, sword and sceptre. What would you suppose is happening? Jonathan gives David his royal paraphernalia—all the visible symbols that would have marked him out as the king's son and therefore his successor. He is recognising that David will be the next king, that David is the saviour of God's people, that David is God's anointed one—and that he, Jonathan, is none of those things. This is made explicit in 23:17: "'Don't be afraid,' [Jonathan] said. 'My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You shall be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this.'"

But here is the wonderful irony: by giving up the future of his house, Jonathan gains its future under the protection of David. David promises to preserve the house of Jonathan (20:15-17) and, as the book of 2 Samuel recounts, this is what happens (2 Samuel 9).

Jonathan is not just, or primarily, teaching us how to be a good friend. He is teaching us how to be a real follower. Like Jonathan, we are to give up our pretended rights to reign. We are to acclaim David's descendant Jesus as our Christ, as God's King. We are to bind our future to his; to give up control to him. We are to be like John the Baptist, who accepted of his younger cousin

Jesus: “He must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30).

Yet by this very act of **self-renunciation**, we gain a future under the protection of Jesus. Jesus says: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mark 8:34-35).

David is a pointer to Jesus, our rightful King. So the question is: *am I like Saul or am I like Jonathan?*

Saul is determined to cling to power. But gradually he becomes a parody of himself. Power is slipping from his hands. He is unable to see his orders executed. Are you determined to cling to power? Are you determined to be in charge of your life? Do you want to make decisions free from interference?

In contrast, Jonathan graciously acknowledges the power of David. He gives away any claim to authority over his future. He is content to be loyal to David. He entrusts his future to David. Are you content to let Jesus be Lord of your life? Are you bringing every area of your life into submission to him? Are you content to entrust your future to him?

Our society is becoming more and more secular, and yet we still love Christmas. Perhaps that is because no one is afraid of “the baby Jesus”. Jesus in the manger is safe—you do not have to choose to love him or to hate him, because he just sits quietly in the corner of your life, as it were, without interfering. But the risen Christ is another matter. The risen Christ is King. And so you must decide whether you will submit to him or not.

Jesus: you either love him or hate him. Ultimately, there is a choice you and I must make. There can be no compromise. Something will be most precious to us, and we will be angry when it is threatened, and willing to bear the anger of others for our allegiance to it. We will bind our future to it. We will give authority to it. But there is only one that deserves that position of our

ruler, and God has already chosen who that is. It is David's greater Son, the appointed Messiah, the Lord Jesus.

Questions for reflection

1. When it comes to King Jesus, are you more like Saul or Jonathan? In what ways?
2. What do you have to give up, or risk giving up, in order to make Jesus your first loyalty and love?
3. Remember that in giving up the future of his family to God's king, Jonathan gained its future under God's King. How is this a wonderful reassurance to us as Christians?

1 SAMUEL 21 VERSE 1 TO 23 VERSE 25

10. The Wilderness Years

These chapters chart two contrasting trajectories: the rise of David and the decline of Saul. David is the **epitome** of success. He has led Israel to victories without fail. “Whatever mission Saul sent him on, David was so successful that Saul gave him a high rank in the army” (18:5). He has won the hand in marriage of a royal princess. He is, as we have seen, loved by everyone except the angry, jealous, threatened Saul. Meanwhile, Saul is becoming a parody of himself as power slips away from his grasp. He has become a joke, as the **satirists** of the day laugh: “Is Saul also among the prophets?” (19:24).

A Priestly Kingdom

But the joke soon turns sour. David will never be welcomed at court; his life is in danger. From now on he is on the run. David escapes to Nob where, following the destruction of Shiloh, the tabernacle seems to have been moved to (21:1).

What follows is a strange episode. David and his companions need provisions, so he asks for bread (**v 3**). He lies to Ahimelek the priest, claiming: “The king sent me on a mission” (**v 2**). It could be a reference to God, but David must know Ahimelek will think he means Saul. The aim is probably to protect Ahimelek from reprisals (though if that was David’s intent, it turns out that it doesn’t work).

Ahimelek only has **consecrated** bread. This was reserved for priests to eat. But Ahimelek offers it to David if he and his men have kept themselves from women (**v 4-6**). Under the **Levitical laws**, having sex made you temporarily ceremonially unclean. The Bible rejoices in sex within marriage, but it seems that the release of bodily fluids, whether semen or blood, symbolised death and so made you unclean. Even so, it is unclear why Ahimelek insists on this rule, while being willing to give the bread to non-priests.

Whatever the reason, Jesus refers to this incident and clears David and Ahimelek (Matthew 12:1-8). The Old Testament law included case law, showing how the spirit of the law applied in different situations. Sometimes keeping the spirit of the law involved breaking the letter of law. This was a far cry from **situational ethics** or **relativism**, because the spirit of the law remained sovereign. Mercy triumphed over judgment. Jesus himself comments on the story with these words: “If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent” (Matthew 12:7).

But perhaps the larger point is this. Although we cannot know for sure, Ahimelek would probably not have given the consecrated bread to most people. He gave it to David because David was God’s anointed. Again, this is how Jesus applies the story: “For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:8). Jesus is not simply arguing about the interpretation of the law. He is claiming to be the new David. One of the signs that Saul was God’s anointed was that “three men going up to worship God at Bethel” would offer him bread (1 Samuel 10:3-4). Now it is David who receives bread from the priest.

Israel practised a strict separation of the roles of king and priest. So David is not a priest. But he will be the king, and the representative of a priestly kingdom. At Mount Sinai, God had declared that Israel was “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:4-6). Through a life regulated by God’s law, Israel was to demonstrate the goodness of God’s reign to the world. They had the priestly role of making God known to the nations and bringing them to the place of atonement, the tabernacle. David was becoming the

representative of this priestly kingdom; and so perhaps it should not surprise us to see him being treated as a priest in some respects. In the desert, God had provided for Israel by giving them bread from heaven. The tabernacle was not heaven; but it was a representation of heaven (Hebrews 8:5). So in a sense David, the true representative of God's people, receives bread from heaven.

There is one other rather ambiguous note in the story: "Now one of Saul's servants was there that day, detained before the LORD; he was Doeg the Edomite, Saul's chief shepherd" (1 Samuel **21:7**). No further explanation is given. But it is an ominous line, especially as the name "Do'eg" sounds like the Hebrew word *d'g*: "worry".

A Strange Deliverance

With fresh supplies, David then heads off for Gath (**v 10**). It is an odd choice, because Gath is a Philistine city. What is more, David has just acquired Goliath's sword (**v 8-9**), and Gath was Goliath's hometown. With this all-too-visible reminder that he is the defeater of the Philistines, he seeks refuge in a Philistine city. It was perhaps a desperate move, running from Saul to find protection among Saul's enemies.

But the Philistines are also David's enemies. The servants of Achish, the king of Gath, describe David as "the king of the land" and cite the song of the Israelite women: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands" (**v 11**). At this point, calling David the king is a mistake—Saul is still king. But it is an unwitting sign of the shift in power. When the song was first sung, it was a sign that David was replacing Saul as the champion of Israel (18:5-16). Now it is used to support the idea that David is replacing Saul as the king of Israel.

The situation is not looking good for David—he is “very much afraid” (21:12). The text says: “He was in their hands”, which implies he is in custody (v 13). So David pretends to be mad, and as a result Achish sends him on his way (v 13-15).

David reflects on this incident in two psalms. Psalm 56 was written “when the Philistines had seized [David] in Gath”. It begins with a description of Saul’s pursuit:

*Be merciful to me, my God, for my enemies are in hot pursuit;
all day long they press their attack.
My adversaries pursue me all day long;
in their pride many are attacking me. (Psalm 56:1-2)*

The psalm describes the pain of rejection and sadness of exile: “Record my misery; list my tears on your scroll” (v 8). What is David’s hope in this situation?

*When I am afraid, I will put my trust in you.
In God, whose word I praise—
in God I trust and am not afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me? (v 3-4)*

This refrain is repeated in verses 10-11. David’s hope is in God. God will deliver him. His antidote to fear is faith.

Psalm 34 is more upbeat. It celebrates God’s deliverance.

*I sought the LORD, and he answered me;
he delivered me from all my fears.
Those who look to him are radiant;
their faces are never covered with shame.
This poor man called, and the LORD heard him;
he saved him out of all his troubles.
The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him,*

*and he delivers them.
Taste and see that the LORD is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.
Fear the LORD, you his holy people,
for those who fear him lack nothing.
The lions may grow weak and hungry,
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing ...
The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,
and his ears are attentive to their cry ...
The LORD will rescue his servants;
no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned.
(Psalm 34:4-10, 15, 22)*

It is worth remembering that the deliverance described in this psalm was achieved through David drooling and dribbling down his beard like a madman. God's deliverance can take strange forms, but it is still deliverance.

David describes his experience in the cave of Adullam in Psalms 57 and 142. In Psalm 142:4 he says: "I have no refuge". But immediately in the next verse he goes on to say of the LORD: "You are my refuge".

This encourages us to think of all the times when we are tempted to think or to say: *I have no refuge; I have no hope; I have no future; I have no one.* This may be our experience and it is real enough. But there is a bigger reality, and it is to this that faith turns: *God is my refuge; God is my hope; God is my future; I have God.*

An Unjust King and an Unholy War

When Saul discovers what has happened, he is outraged (1 Samuel **22:6**). He realises his court has not kept him informed. The writer again highlights the

way his authority is slipping from him. Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin, and now he appeals to clan loyalty (**v 7**). Surely they should choose Saul, their fellow Benjaminite, instead of this “son of Jesse” (**v 8**), the pretender to the throne from the tribe of Judah.

Then he appeals to their self-interest: “Will the son of Jesse give all of you fields and vineyards? Will he make all of you commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds?” (**v 7**). It echoes the warning of Samuel in 8:10-14—that the king would take from some and give to others in order to bolster his power. What Samuel predicted the king would do, Saul is now promising to do. Saul is becoming the kind of self-serving and unjust king that Samuel feared. And he boasts of it!

The Israelites may not betray David, but Doeg does. Both in **21:7** and **22:9**, the writer calls him: “Doeg the Edomite”. His ethnic background matters. He is a Gentile, not truly one of God’s people. The Edomites were historic enemies of Israel, descended from Esau (Genesis 25:30; 36:9); they had refused to let the Israelites pass through their territory after the exodus (Numbers 20:14-21). Saul is seated “spear in hand” (1 Samuel **22:6**), appearing like a Gentile king with Gentile armour, and the only person who is loyal to him is a Gentile. He has become a king like those of the nations—the king God had warned his people about and the king they had nevertheless asked for.

Doeg describes the help David received from the priests in Nob (**v 9-10**). In his anger, Saul orders their execution (**v 11-16**). No one in Israel will carry out this crime (**v 17**); but “Doeg the Edomite” will (**v 18-19**). Doeg does not just kill the priest—he kills everyone and everything connected with the town of Nob. It is holy war against God’s priests. Here is the terrible irony, the sign of how far Saul has fallen. In 15:2-3, God told Saul to conduct a holy war against the Gentiles. Now in **22:18-19**, Saul tells a Gentile to conduct a holy war against God.

As if this were not bad enough, Saul pursues these two holy wars with greatly differing, and revealing, levels of zeal. Saul failed to complete the

holy war to which God called him in 15:13-26. He spared the best of the sheep and cattle along with Agag, the king of the Amalekites. But now, only one son of Ahimelek escapes (**22:20-23**).

Saul has set himself up as the ultimate one to whom allegiance should be given. He has set himself up in the place of God—as all tyrants do. Saul was the christ. But now David is the christ, God’s anointed king, and Saul has become the antichrist, in the sense that he opposes David, the true christ. And he is the antichrist in that he has come to embody the opposite of what it means to be a king in Israel. Saul is an antichrist conducting an unholy war.

A New Court

But for all his murderous efforts, power continues to slip from Saul’s grasp. He has no authority in his court. His officials will not tell him what is happening (**v 8**), nor will they carry out his orders (**v 17**).

Meanwhile, David’s authority rises even as his circumstances decline. He is going to spend the next few years on the margins of society. He is a **fugitive** on the run. Months before, he was being anointed by Samuel as king and slaying the giant Goliath. Now he is in enemy territory, pretending to be mad. And yet we begin to see David forming a royal court around him. As Saul’s family are alienated from Saul, David’s family are reunited with David (**22:1**). For their safety he settles them in Moab, the home of his great-grandmother, Ruth (**v 3-4**). As Saul destroys the priesthood, David provides a refuge for Abiathar the priest. Saul says to Ahimelek the priest: “You shall surely die, Ahimelek, you and your whole family” (**v 16**). In contrast, David says to Ahimelek’s surviving son: “You will be safe with me” (**v 23**).

The beginnings of David’s kingdom are starting to take shape. “All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered round him, and he

became their commander. About four hundred men were with him” (v 2). It is not the most auspicious beginning—the distressed, the fugitives and the malcontents. But notice who is included in this troubled band: David the king (v 1); Gad the prophet (v 5); and Abiathar the priest (v 23). Both the prophet and priest will remain with David throughout his life (1 Chronicles 29:29). Opposed by the world, hunted by Saul, peopled by rejects, yet centred on king, priest and prophet: this is an alternative Israel in the making.

It would not be so very different for David’s greater descendant. In Matthew 4, Jesus calls twelve disciples, the basis for a new Israel. He then goes up on a mountain to give his new community a new law (Matthew 5:1-2), just as Moses had been given the law on Mount Sinai. But this new kingdom begins with fishermen, traitors, and terrorists. It is the “poor in spirit” to whom the kingdom of heaven is given (Matthew 5:3). Like David, Jesus begins with a motley crew. Like David, he and his people will be opposed by the world and hurt by Israel’s leaders. But it is centred on a king, a priest and a prophet—on one man, Jesus. This is the people of God.

And that group of outcasts and rejects will extend his kingdom to the ends of the earth as they proclaim his name. This motley crew will turn “the world upside down” (Acts 17:6, ESV).

The same pattern was replicated in Corinth. Paul wrote to them: “Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong” (1 Corinthians 1:26-27).

And perhaps this pattern is being replicated in your church. Perhaps what you see is a group of people who are not wise, influential or noble by human standards. But David’s story encourages us to regard one another with the eyes of faith. God has chosen us with all our weaknesses and failings to magnify his grace, and shame the pride of this world.

Questions for reflection

1. If you have time, read one or all of Psalms 34; 56; 57; and 142. How do they speak into your life today?
2. How do you see yourself? Do you recognise yourself as someone who, in distress, debt and discontent, turned to Christ Jesus?
3. Do you seek to hide your weaknesses, or allow them to magnify God's grace and undermine the pride of the world? How?

PART TWO

The King from the Margins

Jesus grew up in the northern town of Nazareth, away from the centres of power and wealth. For three years, he had no home. “Foxes have dens and birds have nests,” he said once, “but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20). He faced prejudice and rejection.

Here is the problem: the fact that Jesus lived on the margins, that he was homeless, that people hated him—all those things meant he did not look like a king. We need to feel the **dissonance** between what the world thinks of as a king (and what many of the prophets predicted about the king), and the lifestyle of the One whom we call our King. Imagine you met some 30-year-old guy living on a sofa in a shabby area of a rundown provincial town. And he sticks his head out of his sleeping bag and says: *One day I’m going to be the king of England*. You would think he was crazy or high.

Well, this is Jesus. He is from the north, miles away from Jerusalem. He has no home, no money, no qualifications. He is the son of a carpenter (though even that is disputed). His followers are a bunch of uneducated, working-class lads.

Yet he claims to be God’s anointed King, God’s Christ.

Then he gets himself arrested and executed. He is killed on a cross, the most shameful way to die. Crucifixion was not even mentioned in polite company. For the Jews, it meant you were cursed by God. What use is a cursed, dead king?

The Jews expected the Christ to come and deliver them from the hands of the Romans. They expected him to come in a blaze of glory and sweep God's enemies out of God's land. And what they got was Jesus. When he healed the sick, calmed the storm and fed the hungry, he looked the part. But he was also rejected. He suffered. In the end, he was tortured and executed. How can this be the Christ? For us, it might not seem a big deal because we have the benefit of historical distance and hindsight. But for the disciples on the road to Emmaus a few days after his death, it is an insurmountable problem. "We had hoped," they say, "that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). We *had* hoped. But now he is dead.

The stranger they are speaking to replies: "'How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:25-27).

The stranger was Jesus, risen from the dead. But notice what he says to them: *You should have known the Messiah had to suffer*. His sufferings are the proof that he is the Messiah. Rather than being an obstacle to recognising that he is the Messiah, they are a sign of his royal identity. And these men should have known this all along, he says, because this is what the Old Testament teaches. *You should have known because it was in the Bible all along*. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus shows the two disciples how the Bible speaks of the suffering of the Christ.

The question is this: *which Old Testament Scriptures did Jesus take them to?* Where does the Old Testament teach that the Messiah must suffer? Perhaps there is a clue in Genesis 3:15, which speaks of the snake striking the heel of the one who will crush its head. Psalm 22 speaks of one being forsaken by God, although the psalm itself does not present itself as predictive—it describes the current experience of an individual. Isaiah 53 is an obvious choice. It talks about someone who takes our pain and bears our suffering, someone who is punished in our place.

But is this *all*? Jesus talks about “*all* the Scriptures” and “*all* the Prophets” (Luke 24:27). The Jewish Bible was divided into the former prophets (our history books) and the latter prophets (our prophetic books). So when Jesus speaks about “all the Prophets”, it means both the former and latter prophets; the history books as well as the prophetic books. So where else in the Old Testament did Jesus go?

I suggest he went to 1 Samuel and the psalms of David. I think the argument went something like this:

What did you expect the Christ to be like? Think about David. After all, David was Israel's greatest king. God promised that one of his descendants would rule over God's people for ever. God promised a new King David, a greater David, who would save God's people. David was God's anointed, a christ. One of his descendants would be the Christ, the One who would rescue God's people from sin and death. So David is the prototype of the Christ, the Saviour-King. If you want to know what the Christ will be like, then the best place to go to is the life of David.

So how did David come to the throne? By spending years living on the margins, with no home, facing prejudice and betrayal. The writer of Samuel spends 20 chapters describing the life of David after he is crowned, from 2 Samuel 5 onwards. But he also spends 20 chapters describing the life of David before he is crowned.

Moreover, the first book of psalms was written by or about David during this period. And they are mostly psalms of lament. They describe David suffering as he awaits his kingdom. And the New Testament writers (including Jesus himself as he hung on the cross) saw in these psalms a description of Jesus. The laments of David were a prototype or picture of the suffering of his great successor.

The story of David in 1 Samuel is the proof that the Christ must suffer; the proof that Jesus is the suffering Christ. If this is how Israel's greatest king came to his throne, then we should expect this to be how Israel's ultimate

King comes to his throne. So when the early church wanted to prove that the despised and rejected One was in fact God's true King, this is where they went.

The Christ is Betrayed

Consider what happens to David the christ in chapter 23. It is the story of two betrayals.

David hears that the Israelite town of Keilah is being attacked by the Philistines (**v 1**). So he enquires of the LORD. **Verse 6** adds a word of explanation. When Abiathar escaped to David from Doeg, he brought with him the ephod of the high priest (**v 6**). The ephod was a breastpiece—the ephod of the high priest contained the Urim and Thummim (Exodus 28:30; Leviticus 8:8). We do not know what the Urim and Thummim looked like, but they were used for receiving revelation from God. David, rather than Saul, is now the one who has access to guidance from God. In this way the LORD tells David to save the town (1 Samuel **23:2**). But fear makes David's men reluctant. As a result, David enquires of the LORD a second time, and this time the LORD explicitly promises victory (**v 3-4**).

So David rescues the town (**v 5**). Saul has just attacked an Israelite town (Nob) through a Gentile (Doeg). In contrast, David saves an Israelite town (Keilah) by attacking Gentile enemies (the Philistines).

When Saul hears about this, he says: "God has delivered him into my hands, for David has imprisoned himself by entering a town with gates and bars" (**v 7**). Again there is a contrast with David. David goes to Keilah to defeat the Philistines; Saul rushes there to besiege David (**v 8**). David has the priestly ephod, and so understands God's purposes. Saul does not have the ephod, and so misreads God's purposes. David uses the ephod to discover

from God how the people of Keilah will react to Saul's advance (**v 9-11**). The LORD tells him they will betray him to Saul. So he escapes into the wilderness (**v 12-14**).

David moves to the Desert of Ziph, but Saul continues to pursue him (**v 15**). Again the local people betray him, this time on their own initiative (**v 19-20**). Again Saul misunderstands God's purposes; when they offer to betray David, Saul responds: "The LORD bless you for your concern for me" and confidently sends them off to gather information about David (**v 21-23**). But God's concern is for David. David hears about Saul's advance and escapes to the Desert of Maon (**v 24-25**); and then Saul's pursuit of David is prevented by the news of a Philistine invasion, just as he is "closing in on David" (**v 26-29**).

Psalm 54 was written by David "when the Ziphites had gone to Saul and said, 'Is not David hiding among us?'" In it, he says: "Arrogant foes are attacking me; ruthless people are trying to kill me—people without regard for God" (Psalm 54:3). The psalm begins with a prayer for help. "Save me, O God, by your name; vindicate me by your might" (v 1). And it ends, as the story does, with God's deliverance. "You have delivered me from all my troubles, and my eyes have looked in triumph on my foes" (v 7).

David the christ is betrayed twice. But, while he is rejected by people, he is not rejected by God. God does vindicate him. The rejection of Jesus and his betrayal by Judas may appear to disprove his claim to kingship. But in fact, they confirm that he is the true descendant of David. At the cross, Jesus was condemned as an impostor and blasphemer. He died under the mocking title: *King of the Jews*. But through the resurrection, God vindicated him. His resurrection is the confirmation that he is "both Lord and Messiah" (Acts 2:36).

The Christ in the Wilderness

“David stayed in the wilderness strongholds and in the hills of the Desert of Ziph” (1 Samuel **23:14**). In 26:3, David is still in the wilderness. “Saul made his camp beside the road on the hill of Hakilah facing Jeshimon, but David stayed in the wilderness.” The text draws a contrast between Saul and David. Saul, even on manoeuvres, is in his “camp”, “but” David is in the wilderness. At the end of chapter 26 we read: “So David went on his way, and Saul returned home” (v 25). It is rather poignant. Saul goes home, but David has no home to go to. He can only go “on his way”. David has to live in the desert, hiding in caves. He has no home. Just like Jesus.

We talk about a politician being in the wilderness; they are marginalised and their career is going nowhere. In 1 Samuel 23 – 26, David is in the wilderness both literally and **metaphorically**. Twelve of the fifteen references to wilderness or desert in 1 Samuel are in these chapters (**23:14, 15, 24, 25**; 24:1; 25:1, 4, 14, 21; 26:2, 3), and chapters 24 – 26 all start their respective narratives with a reference to David being in the wilderness. These are David’s wilderness years. He is the Christ on the margins.

So the story told in 1 Samuel and reflected in the first book of the psalms played a major part in the **apologetic** of the early church. This is the proof that the suffering Messiah is the true Messiah. Far from bringing his identity into question, his betrayal and marginalisation confirm Jesus as David’s true successor.

Why must the Christ suffer? Jesus could have come in power and glory, sweeping away his enemies. The problem is that we are all by nature enemies of God. The triumph of Jesus would have meant our defeat. The vindication of Jesus would have meant our judgment. So in his grace, Jesus came in a hidden way. His sufferings have created the opportunity for repentance. But more than that, judgment did fall when Jesus came. But it fell on Jesus himself. He died in our place. He took the judgment we deserve. We are vindicated in him. So when he comes in glory—as he will—we can enjoy his reign rather than face his judgment.

We Suffer Like the Christ

In the meantime, we suffer with, like and for the Christ. David the christ suffered. Then Jesus the Christ suffered. And now those who are in Christ can expect to suffer. Christ said: “Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master’. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me” (John 15:20-21).

If our King is mistreated, then we can and must expect to be mistreated. If David had 20 chapters before he received glory, then we should expect 20 chapters in our lives before we receive glory! There is a moment in the story of Acts when the apostles are flogged and we read: “The apostles left the **Sanhedrin**, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (Acts 5:41).

We should expect to suffer. But when we suffer, we can entrust ourselves to God. 1 Samuel **23:14** says: “Day after day Saul searched for him, but God did not give David into his hands”. David could choose not to use violence against Saul because he knew that God would establish his kingdom. Christians do not and should not use violence because we know that God will establish the kingdom of the Christ.

We need to get our expectations right. Too often, we expect to be able to get on in our careers without our faith creating problems for us. Too often, we expect to be able to share our faith without facing opposition. Too often, we expect God to solve our problems and take away our suffering. In other words, too often we actually expect glory now without suffering.

Yet one thing Paul and Barnabas said to encourage the new churches he had planted was this: “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). In the Christian life, hardship is a must, not an option. The promise of hardship will not sound encouraging if your life is compromised and comfortable. But if you are experiencing hardship

because of your faith, then it is very reassuring to discover that this is normal Christian living, and that the road through hardship leads to the kingdom.

The pattern of suffering followed by glory which we see in the life of David, and which we see in the cross and resurrection, is our pattern. There is encouragement in the wilderness, as we shall see in chapter eleven (1 Samuel 23:16-18), because God is with us and he promises us a glorious future. But it is still the wilderness. There is suffering before glory.

Questions for reflection

1. How has this section encouraged you to see that Jesus really is God's promised Christ?
2. Do you need to re-set your expectations of the Christian life in any way?
3. How will you remember both the reality of present suffering and future glory that are yours in Christ?

1 SAMUEL 23 VERSE 26 TO 26 VERSE 25

11. Testing times

David is in the wilderness on the run from Saul, having been betrayed by those whom he has saved. Now the two men are on opposite sides of a mountain: Saul chasing David, and David running away (**23:26**). It may be that Saul's troops are advancing around either side of the mountain in a pincer movement until they are called away by Philistine attack. It may be that David and Saul are circling the mountain Tom-and-Jerry style. The key thing is that the mountain separates them.

The LORD is My Rock

That mountain is simply referred to as "the rock" (v 25). When David hears that Saul is coming for him, he goes to "the rock". The writer comments: "That is why they call this place Sela Hammahlekoth", which means "rock of parting" (v 28). This rock has protected David by keeping him apart from his enemy.

The two-volume book of Samuel begins and ends with two songs, and both songs have the same refrain:

*There is no one holy like the LORD;
there is no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God. (1 Samuel 2:2)
The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;*

my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. (2 Samuel 22:2-3)

For who is God besides the LORD?

And who is the Rock except our God?

*It is God who arms me with strength
and keeps my way secure. (22:32-33)*

The LORD lives! Praise be to my Rock!

Exalted be my God, the Rock, my Saviour. (22:47)

In this story, David is protected by the rock that comes between him and Saul. But at the end of his life David says: “Who is the Rock except our God?” and “The LORD is my rock”. This mountain rock is a picture of God the Rock. As he reflects on his time in the wilderness, and indeed his whole life, he realises that all along God has been like that rock. God is the Rock between us and our enemies, between us and death. God is our refuge in times of trouble.

This is what we need to remind one another about. This is what Jonathan did for David when he “went to David at Horesh and helped him to find strength in God. ‘Don’t be afraid,’ he said. ‘My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You shall be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this’” (1 Samuel 23:16-17).

Think about what this would have involved. Saul, with all the forces at his disposal and a network of people ready to inform on David (v 22-23), cannot track David down. Of course Jonathan has the advantage that David will want to see him. But he cannot just ring David up and arrange a meeting. Imagine David hiding out in the mountains. How would you find him? Jonathan cannot phone him and arrange a rendezvous. You would have to put your backpack on and wander around in the hope of coming across him.

This is a big challenge to us. We can be **diffident** about proactively encouraging others. There is no reason for this meeting other than for Jonathan to encourage David. Jonathan goes out of his way (quite literally) to encourage David. Moreover, this story is sandwiched between two stories of betrayal (v 7-13, 19-24). In the midst of treachery, Saul’s son provides

comfort to David.

It is also a lovely description of what gospel encouragement involves. Jonathan does not simply say: *Things aren't so bad* or: *Maybe it'll be better next month* or: *Others have it even tougher than you*. No, he “helped him to find strength in God” (v 16). The LORD tells David: “I will give the Philistines into your hand” (v 4, NASB). Abiathar comes to David “with an ephod in his hand” (v 6, NASB). Saul thinks: “God has delivered him into my hand” (v 7, NASB). David asks God: “Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand?” (v 11-12, NASB). Whose hand will prevail? The Philistines'? David's? The men of Keilahs'? Saul's?

Now Jonathan comes to strengthen David's hand in God (v 16), assuring him that “the hand of Saul my father will not find you” (v 17, NASB). Jonathan is helping him find strength in God. And the specific content of that encouragement is a reminder that the kingdom of the christ will be established by God.

That is the content of the encouragement that we need, and need to be willing to hear ourselves, and share with others. We may suffer like the Christ, but we can find strength in God because he will establish the kingdom of his Christ.

The First Wilderness Test

Chapters 23 – 26 describe David in the wilderness. And in the wilderness he faces three tests.

The original band of 400 men who joined David has swollen to 600 (23:13). But Saul now comes after him with 3,000 hand-picked men from all Israel (24:1-2). David and his men are hiding at the back of a cave when Saul comes in to relieve himself (v 3). There are many caves in the Desert of En

Gedi, but Saul picks the one with David hiding in the back. So David's men whisper: *This is your chance. God has given you this opportunity to kill Saul.* Instead, David creeps up and cuts off the corner of Saul's robe (v 4). (Presumably Saul had taken it off to avoid any splashing!)

David could kill Saul; but he resists. Yet he still thinks what he has done is wrong—he is “conscience-stricken” (v 5). “He said to his men, ‘The LORD forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the LORD’s anointed, or lay my hand on him; for he is the anointed of the LORD’” (v 6).

Why is David conscience-stricken about cutting Saul's robe? The answer can be found where we have met robes before in the story. When God rejects Saul in chapter 15, Saul grabs hold of Samuel's robe. When it tears, Samuel tells him that his kingdom will be torn too—away from him, and given to “one of your neighbours—to one better than you” (15:28). Then in 18:4, Jonathan gives his robe to David as a sign that he is giving his kingdom to David. In 20:15, Jonathan pleads with David: “Do not ever cut off your kindness from my family—not even when the LORD has cut off every one of David's enemies from the face of the earth”.

Now David “cuts off” the corner of Saul's robe, symbolically cutting off his kingdom. But David is conscience-stricken because he refuses to *grab* the kingdom. He is willing to live on the margins until God *gives* him the kingdom. He “rebuked” or literally “tore into” or “tore apart” his men (24:7). David tore a strip off his men for suggesting he should tear the kingdom from Saul.

But David does challenge Saul. When Saul is at a safe distance, David shouts after him, in essence: *Look, I could have killed you. Here's the corner of your robe. Here's the proof I'm not guilty of rebellion* (v 8). He does not begin by accusing Saul directly. Instead he suggests Saul is ill-informed and ill-advised (v 9). He creates a space for Saul to back down without loss of face. Then he holds up the corner of Saul's robe as proof of his innocence. He clearly means no ill-will towards Saul because he has refused the opportunity to harm him (v 10-11). David describes himself as a dead dog or

a flea (**v 14**, see also 26:20). The point is that David represents no threat to Saul.

David quotes an old saying: “From evildoers come evil deeds”. It is literally: “from evildoers come out evildoers”. David uses it to justify his refusal to kill Saul (**v 13**)—but then he immediately repeats the words “come out”. “Against whom has the king of Israel come out?” (**v 14**) In effect, David is saying: *Evil comes out of evil doers. What is coming out of you and what does that show you to be?* Both before and after asking this question, David asserts his own innocence (**v 10-12, 15**). Again the implication is clear: if the guilty person in this conflict is not David, then it must be Saul.

In response to David’s words and actions (or lack of actions), Saul is contrite—at least for now. He acknowledges that David has treated him well, and that he has treated David badly (**v 16-19**). Even more significantly, he acknowledges that David will succeed as king (**v 20**), and, like Jonathan, asks David to swear not to wipe out his family or his name (**v 21-22**).

Our cable television provider recently gave us a digital recorder. It means we can record television programmes and watch them later. One of the great things about that is you can fast forward through the boring bits. I like to watch sports highlights. Now I can fast forward through the analysis and just watch the action. Imagine you could fast forward through your life. If you are experiencing something you do not like, then you can hit fast-forward and skip that bit of your life. What would you skip?

In that cave, David had the opportunity to skip his life of suffering and fast-forward to the throne. But that is not God’s way. It was not God’s plan. So it was not his.

When do you wish you could hit the fast-forward button? Could it be that God is allowing you to suffer so that he can teach you an important lesson or reshape your life in some way?

Are there ways in which you are trying to hit the fast-forward button—

ways in which you are tempted to compromise so you can avoid difficult situations? Perhaps you keep quiet about Jesus to avoid the scorn of others. Perhaps you are not challenging the behaviour of a Christian friend because you fear their response. Perhaps you are tempted to compromise in the workplace so you make progress in your career or seal the deal. The problem is that it is not really a fast-forward button; it is a pause button. As we saw in the last chapter, we cannot skip the suffering. That way does not really lead to glory. It is not God's way for us or his plan for us; so it is not to be our way or our goal.

Questions for reflection

1. When in your life have you most clearly known Christ as your Rock?
2. When are you tempted to take justice out of God's hands and into your own? How can you use David's example and words to help you let God be Judge?
3. In what one way would you most like to "fast-forward" through your present experience to eternal glory? How can you obey Jesus in that area?

PART TWO

The Second Test

Chapter 25 begins by briefly describing the death of Samuel (v 1), although he will make one more appearance in the story. Then the action switches back to David.

David and his men have been protecting the flocks of a man called Nabal. He is very wealthy; he is also “surly and mean in his dealings” (v 2-3). And he is a Calebite. We are told this by way of contrast. Caleb was one of the two spies who believed Israel could capture the promised land despite the size of the people living there, because God was on their side. He was the very opposite of Nabal, his descendant.

We are also introduced to Nabal’s wife, Abigail, “an intelligent and beautiful woman” (v 3). At this point, the detail appears to be given simply as a contrast to Nabal, but in fact she will prove to be the key figure in the story.

It is sheep-shearing time (v 4), and David sends some of his men to Nabal (v 5-6), asking him to be generous to them in recognition of how David and his men have protected his shepherds (v 7-9).

The word Nabal means “fool” (perhaps it was a nickname). And Nabal, true to his name, says: “Who is this David?” *Why should I give anything to some runaway slave?* (v 10-11) Nabal is acting like an Edomite, Moabite or Ammonite, who were all condemned for not assisting God’s people in the wilderness (Numbers 20; Deuteronomy 23).

David describes himself as “your son” as a sign of respect (1 Samuel **25:8**). But Nabal pointedly refers to him as: “this son of Jesse” (**v 10**), simultaneously disassociating himself from David and demeaning David’s family by implying he is not from a noble family. Nabal’s priorities are clear from his repeated use of the word “my”. “Shall I take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers and give it to men who come from I do not know where?” (**v 11**, ESV).

When this is reported to David, he says in effect to his men: *Strap on your swords. After all we’ve done for him, he’s paid me back evil for good. I’m going to kill him and all his men* (**v 12-13**).

Fortunately Nabal’s wife, Abigail, hears what’s happened and she rushes after David with gifts (**v 14-19**). She is just in time; as she meets his men (**v 20**), David is just swearing that he will respond to Nabal’s ingratitude for his protection (**v 21**) by killing him and all his men (**v 22**).

When Abigail reaches David, she bows to the ground (**v 23**), begs him to listen (**v 24**), and says: “Pay no attention [to my husband]. His name means Fool, and folly goes with him” (**v 25**). In other words: *He’s a bit of an idiot* (not the first wife to say that about her husband—here, it is well-deserved). She illustrates the fact that our duty to honour authority is not absolute unless that authority is absolute (ie: God himself). She calls David “my lord” (**v 24**), a phrase often used of a husband (1 Peter 3:6). Her allegiance to the Christ supersedes her allegiance to her husband.

It is an amazing speech. She points out that until this point, David has resisted the temptation to avenge “yourself with your own hands” 1 Samuel **25:26**). She gives David the gifts her husband should have given (**v 27**). She affirms that God will give David a lasting dynasty and that God will protect him as he continues to live his way (**v 28**). And she says that his life “will be bound securely in the bundle of the living by the LORD your God” (**v 29**). God holds the bundle of the living like a bundle of sticks, and David is tied tightly into the bundle.

Then she says, in effect: *God will make you king, so don't become king with blood on your hands (v 30-31)*. David can skip this life of suffering. He can end this prejudice and betrayal. He can take justice into his own hands. And he will be king. But that is not God's way. If David does not learn mercy, what kind of king will he become?

Again, kingship is the issue. "Nabal," we are told, "was in the house holding a banquet like that of a king" (v 36). Nabal acts like a king, but he is a fool. David acts like a fool, but he is the king.

Abigail's intervention saves everyone (though not for long, in Nabal's case). She saves her present husband from harm, and her future husband from bloodguilt. David praises God for her (v 32): "May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands" (v 33). It would have been very different if she had not intervened (v 34). He accepts her gifts and assures her of peace (v 35).

The story ends with some black humour. That night, Nabal gets drunk, so Abigail waits until the morning so she can tell him what she has done when he is sober. The word "sober" in **verse 37** is literally "the wine had gone out of him". The Hebrew word for wineskin is *nebel*. It is a pun on Nabal's name —Nabal is a *nebel*, a deflated wineskin. Presumably he has a long pee and, as the wine goes out of him, we are to think of him shrivelling up like a deflated balloon. The book of 1 Samuel began with Hannah's song, in which she spoke of the reversal of fortunes coming to "those who were full" (2:5). Nabal was full of wine and full of himself, but now he is emptied and brought low. When Abigail tells him what she has done, his heart fails, and ten days later he dies (**25:38**).

David takes Abigail as his wife (v 39-42). "An intelligent and beautiful" wife might sound like a good idea. But she is not his only wife (v 43-44). The writer passes no comment on David's polygamy at this point, but Samuel had warned that kings would "take" (8:11-18), and David is "taking" wives for himself. When David sees another man's wife in 2 Samuel 11, his habit of

taking wives will prove disastrous for his house.

The Third Test

1 Samuel 26 looks like a re-run of chapter 24. Again, the Ziphites betray David (**26:1**, just as in 23:19). Again, Saul is chasing David (**26:2-4**). His tears and words in **24:16-21** were clearly meaningless or short-lived. And again, David is in a position to kill Saul. Yet again, he refrains, and again, Saul expresses a measure of remorse.

This time, David finds Saul and his men asleep (**26:5**). So David and one his men, Abishai, creep into Saul's camp (**v 6-7**). Abishai says: *Let me stick a spear through Saul while he's asleep*. But David replies: "Don't destroy him! Who can lay a hand on the LORD's anointed and be guiltless?" (**v 8-9**). David imagines a number of scenarios for Saul's future: an untimely death, a natural death or a death in battle (**v 10**). God has many options for achieving his purposes and bringing justice. It is not for Abishai, or David, to choose the option and seek to force God's hand.

I often find myself in prayer suggesting to God how he might, or even should, or must, act. But he has options of which I cannot even dream. And he knows which is best to accomplish his purposes (which include my good, as his child; Romans 8:28). What matters is David's faith that the LORD will establish his kingdom (1 Samuel **26:11**). Once again, David has the chance to skip this life of suffering and fast-forward to his kingdom. But that is not God's way, and so it will not be David's.

Instead, David simply takes Saul's water jug and spear, perhaps because they represent Saul's ability to sustain himself and protect himself (**v 12**). He symbolically disarms Saul.

This time, David speaks to Abner, Saul's army commander, who should

have protected Saul (**v 13-14**). There is some good-humoured banter in David's comments, but there is a serious point as well (**v 15-16**). David concludes: "You and your men must die". It is literally: "You are sons of death". This was what Saul said of David in 20:31. The point is that it is not David who is a son of death, but Abner. David is again proving that he intends no harm against Saul and so does not deserve to be called a son of death.

The shouted exchange wakes Saul, who recognises David's voice (**26:17**). For a second time, David invites God to judge between him and Saul (**v 18-20**; see **24:14-15**). In chapter 25, David rushed to judgment, and his rush to revenge threatened to make him guilty. But this time round, David is happy to leave justice to God. In **25:38** we were told that the LORD "struck" down Nabal. Now in **26:10**, David uses the same word to suggest the LORD may "strike" down Saul. David has learned that God will bring justice, and so he has learned that he, David, does not need to take matters into his own hands, with the attendant risk of staining those hands with blood.

This does not mean David is indifferent to injustice. The psalms call out to God for justice with a passion that sometimes embarrasses our sensibilities. But David refuses to fast-forward to judgment. He is content to let God be the judge.

Paul commends the same attitude to those who are in Christ: "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19). A Christian knows that God will bring justice. God's justice has been seen at the cross, and the fact that God's judgment is coming has been proved by the resurrection (Acts 17:31). We can leave justice confidently in his hands, and act in obedience to him rather than out of a desire to vindicate or avenge ourselves.

In 1 Samuel 26, Saul is again contrite, and gives his blessing to David (**v 21, 25**). Saul admits: "Surely I have acted like a fool" (**v 21**). He is a fool like Nabal. Saul is Nabal and Nabal is Saul. And David is not—he is the man who

could have killed Saul with his own spear (**v 22-23**), but who knows that God desires “righteousness and faithfulness” (**v 23**), and who trusts God to “value [his] life and deliver [him] from all trouble” (**v 24**).

Three times in the wilderness, David has been tested. Each time the question has been: *will David become a fool who grasps his kingdom through bloodshed?* And each time (though the second time, only just), the answer has been: *no*.

The Christ and the Wilderness

This three-part wilderness testing echoes back and forwards in the Bible. Adam was tested. Israel was tested. Indeed, like David, Israel was tested in the wilderness. One third of the uses of the words “good” and “evil” in the Old Testament come in 1 Samuel 24 – 26, including statements that combine them (**24:17; 25:15, 21**). It is as if David is the new Adam, back in sight of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The christ is the representative of Israel, which is the representative of humanity, which was originally represented by Adam. David recapitulates the stories of Adam and Israel. He is tested in the wilderness, and in this way he is identified as the one who can represent God’s people. And he passes each test. Yet his taking of Abigail as his second wife brings the smallest note of concern. He passes, but he is not perfect.

More significantly, this story points forward to Jesus. Jesus was also tested in the wilderness; and he too was tested three times (Luke 4:1-13). In fact, the tests are very similar. They involve the temptation to fast-forward to glory and skip suffering; to take the throne without the pain. Later on, when Jesus tells his disciples he must suffer, Peter says: *No, don’t do it that way*. And Jesus says: “Get behind me, Satan!” (Mark 8:31-33)—he recognises that behind Peter’s words are the promptings of the devil.

The point is not just that the Christ would suffer, but that the Christ *must* suffer. David is not just suffering in the wilderness. He has the opportunity to skip this suffering and he does not take it. Actually, it is touch and go for David. He does seize the throne, even if only symbolically, by cutting Saul's robe. He does need Abigail's intervention to avoid coming to the throne with blood on his hands. But one way or another, he refuses to hit the fast-forward button. So he points to Jesus and the sufferings of Jesus.

David's temptation was to become a fool who grasps his kingdom through bloodshed. Jesus resists this temptation. He does come to his kingdom through bloodshed, but the blood which was shed was his own. If Jesus had fast-forwarded to his kingdom—as, unlike David, he had every right to do, for he had all the credentials and all the power—then his kingdom could only have been bad news for us. The coming of God's kingdom means bloodshed for all who are rebels against that kingdom—and that includes all of humanity. But when the King came, he came first to die in the place of rebels. He suffered the punishment we deserve, in our place, so that the coming of his kingdom can be good news for those who are in him.

The Christ Suffers Like Us

This means we have a King who has suffered. We have a King who is like us. The writer of Hebrews says: "In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered" (2:10). This does not mean that Jesus was flawed, and had to be purged or put right. It means that he needed to be equipped or qualified to be our Saviour. He needed to know what it was like to be human. He needed to be one of us.

This is really important. Jesus did not go straight to being crowned. To be

our Saviour, he could not even go straight from his baptism to the cross. He had to experience problems and pain so that he could sympathise with us in our problems and pain.

We worship Jesus. Rightly so. He is our King and our God. But there is a danger that we can end up thinking of him as something other than human, or as super-human, as though he floated through his years on earth, impervious to the kinds of tensions and issues that we face each day. No! Jesus is as human as you are.

I remember talking with someone who said: *I just want someone who understands what I'm going through.* So I said: *Jesus understands. He knows what it's like.* My friend said: *He doesn't count. It was different for him.* It is not true! It was not different for Jesus. He was truly human. He had real problems and real heartache. He was despised and rejected. He was misunderstood and betrayed. He was hungry and lonely. He was mocked and tortured.

“We do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (Hebrews 4:15). This is Jesus, the Son of God. God himself knows what it is to be human. He sympathises with us in our weakness. He knows what it is like for you.

You might say: *That was 2,000 years ago. Now Jesus is exalted in heaven.* But his glorification has expanded his capacity to sympathise with every one of us. I only have the capacity to sympathise with a few people at once. My knowledge is limited. My presence is limited. My emotional resources are limited. But the exalted Christ has the power to sympathise with every one of his people, and the Spirit brings his presence to each one of us. He is still as human today as he was when he was here on earth. He still remembers what it is to experience problems. But now he has the capacity to sympathise with every one of us, whatever we are going through and wherever we are. None of us are forgotten by him. None of us are neglected by him.

What does this mean? It means you and I can approach a God who knows, who understands, who listens and who helps. “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). You are not coming to a King who knows nothing of your life. You can talk to God about your problems and pain because he knows what it is like to have problems and pain. When you are in the wilderness, it is no more—it can never be more—than he has experienced. And since he came through the wilderness, it is no more—it can never be more—than he can help you with, and help you through.

Questions for reflection

1. Do you ever find yourself suggesting to God how he should act in your life? How would David have prayed in your situation, do you think?
2. Has this section changed your view of Jesus in any way? How?
3. Are there areas of your life where you feel in the “wilderness”, and about which you need to speak to Jesus right now?

1 SAMUEL 27 VERSE 1 TO 28 VERSE 25

12. A Word from the Grave

Chapter 26 ends with Saul blessing David (26:25). Chapter 27, however, begins with the word “but”.

David knows by now that Saul’s words cannot be trusted. David’s mood turns dark. He “thought to himself, ‘One of these days I shall be destroyed by the hand of Saul’” (27:1). In 26:10, David told Abishai that Saul might go into battle; literally, be “swept away”. Now he uses the same word to describe his own fate. “One of these days I shall be destroyed [swept away] by the hand of Saul” (27:1).

David appears to waver in his faith that God will ultimately give him the kingdom. “David thought to himself” is literally: “David said in his heart”. This is revealing; the state of our hearts is often shaped by what we say to our hearts. Here, what David says to his heart undermines his confidence in God. It runs contrary to both the word of God and his experience of God. In contrast, again and again in the Psalms, David speaks the truth about God to his heart, and this restores his faith and hope. To take one example: “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God” (Psalm 42:5). It is a good question to ask ourselves: *what am I speaking to my heart today?*

Exiled

David concludes: “The best thing I can do is to escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will give up searching for me anywhere in Israel, and I will slip out of his hand” (1 Samuel **27:1**). So he and his men “left and went over to Achish son of Maak king of Gath” (**v 2**).

All the action in chapters 23 – 26 took place in the wilderness. Now all the action involving David takes place in Gentile territory. David is “exiled”. Exile was the ultimate punishment for covenant infidelity. But David is innocent—his exile is undeserved.

The Philistines were descended from the Egyptians (Genesis 10:13-14). So there is perhaps a sense in which David is returning to Egypt (see **27:8**). He will then be the king who comes out of Egypt, a new Moses to liberate his people.

For David, exile is no small thing. In the previous chapter he told Saul: “Now do not let my blood fall to the ground far from the presence of the LORD” (26:20). David had experienced God’s presence and God’s guidance outside the borders of Israel. But he wanted to die in the promised land. He was being punished for the sins of others. With considerable tact, he suggested where the real blame may lie: “If the LORD has incited you against me, then may he accept an offering. If, however, people have done it, may they be cursed before the LORD!” (26:19).

Back in 1 Samuel 4, God himself went into exile. As the Philistines carried the ark of the covenant away as plunder, Eli’s daughter-in-law called her child “Ichabod”—*The Glory has been exiled* (v 21-22). God allowed himself to be judged for the covenant infidelity of his people. Now, God allows the anointed king to go into exile because of the sins of others. A thousand years later the ultimate Christ, David’s greater Son, will die exiled from God, crying out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). He will be exiled so we can come home to God.

Fighting on Whose Behalf?

David goes to the Philistine king, Achish (1 Samuel **27:2-4**). Achish allows David and his men to settle in the town of Ziklag (**v 5-7**). David conducts raids on the traditional enemies of God's people (**v 8**), but tells Achish that he is raiding Israel (**v 10**). The writer adds a comment about the areas where David is raiding: "From ancient times these peoples had lived in the land extending to Shur and Egypt" (**v 8**). It suggests that David may be the new Joshua, continuing the unfinished task of driving out the Canaanites. In 2 Samuel 7:1 and 11, we will find that God gives David rest from all his enemies—a rest Joshua himself failed to achieve (Hebrews 4:8).

The people David attacks could also be seen as enemies of the Philistines, so at one level David is serving Achish. But he is lying about his actions. To avoid detection, David kills everyone so no one can tell Achish what is really happening (1 Samuel **27:9, 11**). As a result, Achish believes David has become so odious to the Israelites that he has truly changed sides (**v 12**). Indeed, Achish makes David his "bodyguard for life"—literally "the guard of my head" (**28:2**). It is an amazing position for a Philistine to grant to David, given what David did to a Philistine's head in 17:51!

It is tempting for us to **adjudicate** on the morality of people's actions in the biblical narrative. Sometimes, the biblical writers make clear whether people have been acting from faith or not. But often, they describe events without passing comment. Was David wrong to escape into the care of a Philistine king? Was David wrong to lie to his protector? The writer's concern is elsewhere, and so it would be unwise for us to draw firm conclusions. The stories are not presented as morality tales like **Aesop's fables**. Their concern is the purposes and promises of God, and how people respond.

In **28:1-2**, David's bluff is called. Achish asks him to join him on a campaign against Israel. If David refuses, then his allegiances will be revealed and his welcome and protection will be gone. If he joins Achish, then he will be forced to fight against his own people. It is a cliffhanger moment... But before we have any resolution, the writer switches our attention back to

Saul.

In chapters 27 – 31, events gather pace as we head towards what will prove to be the end of Saul's reign. The writer switches the action between the stories of David and Saul.

Saul is terrified by the advancing Philistine army (28:4-5). He wants a word from God, but God is silent. Samuel has died (v 3). Saul enquires of the LORD, but gets no reply (v 6). He does not have the Urim and Thummim, which are with David, along with the priest who survived Saul's massacre (23:6).

And so Saul takes the extraordinary step of finding and visiting a medium (28:7-8). He breaks his own laws (v 9-10). Why? To "bring up Samuel" (v 11).

An Encounter with a Medium

What do you make of mediums and spiritualists? What about ouija boards, or séances? Perhaps your instincts tell you that it is wrong to dabble in these things. But is that because they are fakes or because they are dangerous? Are people being taken for a ride? Or do these things really connect us with another world? And is that good or bad?

This is not a matter of **arcane** interest. Many people today visit mediums or attend spiritualist churches. In Italy, the heartland of Roman Catholicism, for example, there are said to be more mediums than Catholic priests. Perhaps you have friends who have visited mediums, or have done so yourself. What do we make of all this?

You might say: *They are fakes*. The advances in science mean we do not need to resort to out-dated explanations of strange phenomena. Mediums and spiritualists are charlatans who pretend to communicate with the dead so that they can prey on vulnerable people.

Or you might say: *They are real*. Mediums and spiritualists really do contact the dead. You might believe some people become restless spirits when they die. Or that some people have “the gift” of connecting with the spirit world.

What does the Bible say? That both of these positions are partly true and partly false.

A lot of mediums and spiritualists are fakes. It is not difficult to manipulate needy people. You can make a lot of a small amount of information. You can create an atmosphere in which people feel strange sensations. Some stage magicians have made a career out of producing these kinds of results, but they are quite clear that what they do is simply trickery.

So a lot of mediums and spiritualists are charlatans. That may well be true of the medium at Endor whom Saul consults. She appears to freak out when she sees Samuel (**28:12**). That may be because she realises her client is King Saul, who has a reputation for expelling mediums. But it may also be because this has never happened to her before. She does her normal jiggery pokery, but this time someone really does appear from the dead.

So some are fakes. But that is not because this is a closed world or because this material world is all there is. The Bible says there is another world, a spiritual world. Colossians 1:16 says that all things were created by Jesus including “things in heaven and on earth, visible *and invisible*, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities”. So, while many mediums and spiritualists, ouija boards and séances are fakes, some are for real.

Yet while some may offer a real encounter with the other world, the encounter is not with departed loved ones. The encounter is with demons. The Bible is quite clear: the dead do not speak. They do not haunt this earth. What you encounter is an evil spirit.

1 Corinthians 10:19-20 says Christians should not participate in pagan worship because behind these things are demons. That is why the Law of Moses prohibited mediums and spiritualists. “Do not turn to mediums or

seek out spiritualists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 19:31; see also Leviticus 20:6, 27; Deuteronomy 18:9-14). That is why Saul had had them expelled from the land (1 Samuel **28:3**).

To say they are fakes is true because many are fakes. But it is only half true because there is a spiritual world alongside the world we see. To say they are real is true because sometimes people do connect to another world. But it is only half true because you are not in contact with departed loved ones. It is contact with evil spirits.

A Word From the Grave

So what happens at Endor? Endor is one of the few times in history when someone does really appear from the dead. The medium sees “a ghostly figure” (**v 13**)—“an old man wearing a robe” (**v 14**). And Saul “knew it was Samuel” (**v 15**). God allows this to happen. But it is not a word of reassurance (and it is certainly not meant to encourage us to see if we can achieve the same thing with departed ones). This is a word of judgment. God judges Saul by giving a word from the grave. This is what Samuel says:

*“Why do you consult me, now that the LORD has departed from you and become your enemy? The LORD has done what he predicted through me. The LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbours—to David. Because you did not obey the LORD or carry out his fierce wrath against the Amalekites, the LORD has done this to you today. The LORD will deliver both Israel and you into the hands of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines.” (**v 16-19**)*

Saul gets a word. But it is not a new word. And it is hardly a welcoming,

affirming or encouraging word. It is simply a reiteration and an intensification of the word he has already received. Samuel is recognised by his robe (**v 14**). Why is that significant? Because this is the robe which, the last time they had met, Saul had ripped as he tried to cling to his kingdom in the face of Samuel's message of God's rejection (15:27-28). Meanwhile, Saul has taken off his royal robe (**28:8**).

Saul visits a medium to conjure Samuel back from the dead. But the dead Samuel says: *Tomorrow you will join me in the grave*. Saul, who hasn't eaten, anticipates the events of the next day as he falls "full length on the ground" (**v 20**). The chapter ends with the medium and Saul's men urging him to eat and regain his strength (**v 21-25**). Previously, the question has twice been posed: "Is Saul also among the prophets?" (10:11, 19:24). The answer now is: *No, he is feasting with a medium*. And it is the final meal of a condemned man.

Questions for reflection

1. What are you speaking to your heart today? Is it undergirding or undermining your confidence in God?
2. How would you use the idea of exile to explain the gospel message?
3. What are your reflections on a biblical view of mediums and contacting the dead?

PART TWO

If you have a friend who visits a medium or attends a spiritualist church, I do not know whether they are being deceived or whether they are in touch with evil spirits. I do know that neither is a good option!

But there is another question we need to ask: *why are mediums so popular?* Why do people go to them? What do they offer? And is there a better option? There are some clues which help answer these questions in the story of Saul and the medium at Endor.

Desperate for the Presence of a Lost One

Saul is afraid. “The Philistines assembled and came and set up camp at Shunem, while Saul gathered all Israel and set up camp at Gilboa. When Saul saw the Philistine army, he was afraid; terror filled his heart.” (28:4-5). And he is afraid because he faces a Philistine army.

But Saul has faced armies before and conquered. The real problem is that he faces this army alone. When Samuel appears, he says: “The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has departed from me” (v 15). What Saul really wants is the presence of God. Then he could face the battle with hope. But he does not have God. He has turned away from God too many times, and now God has judged by him by giving him what he wants.

It happens so often. People ignore God and then complain that God is ignoring them. If you want to be left alone by God, then beware. God may give you what you want; he may leave you alone.

Instead of turning back to God, Saul turns instead to a medium to conjure

up a replacement for God. Some people go to mediums because they cannot bear to live without the one they have lost. They make a person so central to their life, to their identity and to their joy that when that person dies, their life feels utterly empty. This is not the same as grief, which does include a feeling of emptiness and sadness that there is someone missing from life. This is the settled conviction that, without that person, there is no point or purpose to life.

And so, whether or not a medium is real, they will try anything to re-establish contact.

The Bible calls this idolatry. You have substituted a person for God. You have made a person the centre of your life and the source of your identity. But people are not God. They do not live for ever. And yet that idolised person has become so central that the idolatrous person visits a medium to try to make their God-substitute live again.

There is a much better alternative, and that is to make God the centre of our lives, our identities and our joy. Because he never leaves us and always loves us, he is always there when we turn to him in faith.

Desperate for a Word of Reassurance

Why do people consult mediums or go to séances or read horoscopes? Because they want to receive a word of reassurance—that a loved one is OK or that our future is OK.

Again, this is how it is for Saul. Endor was on the other side of the Philistine camp, so to get there Saul had to go through or round enemy territory. But Saul is desperate for some word of reassurance.

But here is the problem: God is silent. “He enquired of the LORD, but the

LORD did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets” (v 6). The name “Saul” means “asked for”—here Saul “sauls” the LORD. But he does not get what he asks for. God remains silent.

This is completely a problem of Saul’s own making. The Urim was used for guidance and kept in the ephod of the breastplate of the high priest. But Saul has killed all the priests (22:16-19)—only one escaped and he took the ephod to David (22:20; 23:6). That is why God does not answer Saul by the Urim! And God does not answer by prophets because Saul rejected the words of the prophet Samuel, and so Samuel rejected Saul (15:35).

Throughout the story, the writer draws a contrast between Saul and David. David has consulted the LORD: he “enquired of the LORD” (23:2). David literally “saule” the LORD. So he is the true “Saul”, who enquires of God in the way God had given to his people—the ephod.

In 22:7-8, Saul complained that no one told him anything. In contrast, God himself tells David what is happening through Abiathar the priest and the ephod (23:6-13). The NIV has 23:6 in brackets, but the structure of the story suggests it is a central idea.

- a. David is told that the Philistines are coming (23:1)
- b. David consults the LORD twice about going to Keilah (23:2-4)
- c. David saves Keilah (23:5)
- d. Abiathar and the ephod (23:6)
- c’. Saul attacks Keilah (23:7-8)
- b’. David consults the LORD twice about leaving Keilah (23:9-12)
- a’. Saul is told that David has left (23:13)

Saul assumes God has spoken or God has acted in ways that he has not (23:7, 21). But it is to David that God discloses what is happening. Saul often

uses the generic term “God”, whereas David uses God’s relational covenant name, “the LORD”—*Yahweh* (23:1-3, 9-12).

This contrast comes into sharp focus in these chapters. The writer overlaps the stories of David and Saul, switching from one to the other. In chapter 30, David consults the ephod, to which he has access because Abiathar the priest is with him. At the very same time, Saul is reduced to consulting a medium.

Saul cannot hear the word of God because Saul has rejected the word of God. God is silent because Saul has silenced him.

We already have a message of reassurance. It is in the word of God. “When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people enquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?” (Isaiah 8:19) In other words, why go to dead people when you can hear from the living God?

The problem is not that God has not spoken to us, but that often we do not want to hear what God has to say. We do not want to admit our need of God, and we do not want to submit our lives to God. We want comfort without demands. We walk away from the God who loves us and into the hands of people who exploit us or, worse still, into the hands of demons who deceive us.

It is not just those who consult mediums who do this. We are all doing it. It is just that, in a sense, we have passed from alchemy to chemistry.

Alchemy was the **pseudoscience** that preceded chemistry. It was obsessed with turning base metals to gold and finding the **elixir** of eternal life. It is associated with occult practice and magic. People tried to predict the future and control their world. Today, alchemy has been replaced by chemistry and the other sciences. Of course, these have brought many benefits. But people also use science to replace God. They use science to explain God out of the picture, or replace God as Sovereign or Saviour.

Alchemy and chemistry are not so very different when they are used to manipulate the world or ignore God. You may not be tempted to consult a medium, but you may try to predict the future and control your world through technology in a way that replaces trust in God.

Christians are not immune from ignoring and replacing God. We may not consult a medium. But often we want some extra message. The Bible is not enough for us.

God wonderfully communicates to us through the Spirit. The Spirit makes God's word come alive to us. The Spirit, who spoke God's word when people wrote the Bible, speaks that word to us afresh as we read the Bible. He may move us to confess sin, or lead us to pray for someone in need, or prompt us to act. But we are not to go looking for our own direct communication from God.

I was recently part of a conversation in which two Christians spoke of how they longed to hear God speak to them, but found it hard to discern what he was saying. Later in the conversation, they talked about not having read all the Bible because it was hard going. They did not seem to find it odd that they should be pursuing a word from God without reading the words of God.

There is another way in which we can make this mistake. It is by going round asking everyone for advice. Looking for advice is a great thing to do. But sometimes people keep asking for advice even though the right thing to do is clear from God's word. But they want a different word, and if they ask enough people, someone will tell them what they want to hear.

Or here is another thing we do. We affirm that the word of God is true, but we say it does not apply in my situation. We could call this "exceptionalism". It happens when I see myself as an exception to what God's word is saying. I recognise that it applies to other people, but my unique circumstances mean it does not apply to me. *I can't serve God because I suffer from depression. I can't serve God because my life is so busy. I can't serve God because my problems are so difficult.*

Here is what God says to this: “The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure” (1 Corinthians 10:13, NLT).

Real Presence and a Real Word

People turn to mediums because they are desperate for the presence of a loved one or they are desperate for a word of reassurance.

But here is the good news. Someone has come back from the dead with a word of reassurance. And that person is Jesus. Jesus is not a ghost. He does not come to us via a medium. He is a real person who has risen again. He could be seen, touched and heard. And he can still be heard today.

Why does this matter? First, because **Jesus is the presence of God**. Jesus described himself as the temple (John 2:19-22). The temple was the great symbol of God’s presence among his people. But the temple was only a symbol. The reality is Jesus. Jesus is “Emmanuel”, God with us. God has lived among us.

Now Jesus has come back from the dead. The last thing that Matthew’s Gospel records Jesus saying before he ascended into heaven is: “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). He is with us through his Spirit.

I cannot bring you a message from your departed loved one. But if you turn to Christ, then God will be with you, always, everywhere, through every situation—the presence of a loved One. Indeed, Jesus is more than a loved one. He is the One who loves us. He loves us like no one else. No-one else gave us life and then gave their life for us.

Christ is particularly present with us in communion. When we take the Lord's Supper, the Spirit makes the ascended Christ present among us by faith. That is why we call it "communion". We commune with Christ. We eat with him. Saul ate with a medium. You and I can eat with Christ spiritually, and look forward to eating with him physically.

Second, because **Jesus is the word of God**. Jesus himself is a word from God (John 1:1-3), a statement of God's love. Deuteronomy 18:9-14 describes how God's people are not to consult mediums and spiritualists or take part in any other similar occult practices. "Let no one be found among you ... who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead" (Deuteronomy 18:10-11). So what can God's people do instead? "I will raise up for them a prophet like [Moses] from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him" (v 18). The Israelites were not to seek a word from the dead, but they did not need to, because they already had the word of God through Moses. And God promises a coming prophet, like Moses, but greater than Moses. That prophet is Jesus.

Samuel is not the only prophet who appears from beyond the grave. At one point during the life of Jesus, he takes Peter, James and John up a mountain, and there Jesus is transfigured into his heavenly glory—and Moses and Elijah appear with him. A voice comes from heaven and says: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (Mark 9:7) What is striking is what the voice does *not* say. Under the circumstances, with the glorified Jesus standing in front of them, we might expect the command to be: *Gaze upon him*. Instead, it is: "Listen to him".

We do not need to consult the dead. We have Jesus. *Listen to him*.

Now Jesus has come back from the dead. And what does he say? "Peace be with you!" (John 20:19, 26) He brings a word of reassurance. Whatever may be happening in our lives, there is peace between us and God.

The chilling moment in the story of Saul and the medium is not so much the moment Samuel appears as when he says to Saul: "The LORD has

departed from you and become your enemy” (1 Samuel **28:16**). A Philistine enemy filled Saul with fear. But that is nothing compared to having God as your enemy. The word from Samuel to Saul is “war”. The LORD will deliver Saul and Israel into the hands of the Philistines (**v 19**).

But the word from Jesus to us is “peace”. The battle between us and God is over. We were enemies of God, but Jesus has reconciled us through his death and resurrection (Colossians 1:22-23). Whatever else we love and whatever else we fear in our lives, there is nothing better than having God as our friend, and nothing that can take that away. The Lord will deliver us through death and into his presence.

The resurrection of Jesus is the sign of that future. He is the firstborn from among the dead. In the meantime, the grave is silent. It is we who must speak. We must proclaim Christ’s message of peace to the world and we must praise Christ here on earth. Psalm 115:17-18 says:

*“It is not the dead who praise the LORD,
those who go down to the place of silence;
it is we who extol the LORD,
both now and for evermore.”*

Perhaps if we spoke more of who God is and what he has said, people would consult mediums less, and give credence to mediums less.

Questions for reflection

1. Why is it both wonderful and challenging to know that Jesus is God's presence and God's reassurance?
2. Can you think of times in your own life when you have ignored God, and then complained that God is ignoring you?
3. Is there anyone (perhaps yourself) whom you need to challenge about their "relationship" with a departed loved one?

1 SAMUEL 29 VERSE 1 TO 31 VERSE 13

13. How the Mighty have Fallen

Throughout 1 Samuel 27 – 31 the action switches between David and Saul. The events are happening at the same time. Sometimes we see them from David's perspective and sometimes from Saul's. We left Saul eating with a medium through whom Samuel has told the king that he has hours left to live (28:19, 24-25). We left David facing the prospect of fighting with the Philistines, against his own people (28:1-2).

David's Dilemma

If David remains loyal to the Philistine king, Achish, then he will be fighting his own people. If he defects, he will be doing so in the middle of the Philistine army. His answer in 28:2 is ambiguous, to say the least. "You will see for yourself what your servant can do."

In chapter 29 the action returns to David. The Philistines were a collection of five city-states. When they fought, the forces of these five city-states would come together to form one army (**29:1**). That is what they do as they gather together at Aphek. But now David turns up with Achish's forces (**v 2**). The other commanders are astonished. There is no way they are going to fight alongside someone whose main claim to fame is having slain tens of thousands of Philistines (**v 3-5**).

Achish sugars the news that David cannot fight with him by affirming that

he believes David to be “reliable”, and that he personally has “found no fault” in him (**v 6-7**). The irony is that David has not really been reliable. He has been doing one thing—attacking Gentile towns—and telling Aphek that he is doing another thing—attacking Israelite towns (27:8-12).

In **29:8**, David keeps up the pretence and feigns disappointment. But he must surely have been mightily relieved. He was faced with the choice of betraying his own people or betraying his Philistine host in the middle of a Philistine army. He must have been wondering how he would get out of this fix when the Philistines themselves gave him a ready-made way out. Even now, David’s words are ambiguous: “Why can’t I go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king?” (**v 8**). The question is: *who does David consider to be his lord the king?* Every indication so far in the story is that he remains loyal to Saul. Or perhaps he is thinking of God as his King. Perhaps he thought his presence among the Philistine army would present a daring opportunity for a surprise attack on them.

The only reference to God in this chapter comes from a Philistine king (**v 6**). Perhaps you find few references to God in your life and maybe even few signs of his hand at work. Perhaps that is how David felt as he **mustered** with the Philistine forces, wondering how he was going to escape with his life. But looking back, it is clear that God was at work in David’s life. It may well be that he is doing more in our lives than we can now appreciate.

David’s Mutiny

David and his men are sent from the battlefield by the Philistines. But their problems are just beginning. They return home to find that the Amalekites have attacked their town and “taken captive the women and everyone else in it, both young and old. They killed none of them, but carried them off as they went on their way” (**30:1-2**). When they discover their homes

destroyed and their families gone (**v 3**), “David and his men wept aloud until they had no strength left to weep” (**v 4**).

In their distress, David’s men talk of stoning him (**v 6**). In Exodus 17:4, Moses had to cope with the people wanting to stone him before a victory over the Amalekites. Now David has people wanting to stone him before a victory over the Amalekites.

But “David found strength in the LORD his God” (1 Samuel **30:6**). In **verse 4**, David “had no strength left” because of his grief. But where David’s strength fails, God’s strength takes over. What did finding strength in the LORD look like? 23:16-17 provides a clue. There, using the same expression, Jonathan “helped [David] to find strength in God”. How? By saying: “Don’t be afraid ... My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You shall be king over Israel, and I will be second to you.” Perhaps now David says the same thing to himself: *Don’t be afraid. God has promised to give you the kingdom and God keeps his promises.*

The Psalms provide another clue. They often begin with an honest expression of doubt and despair, and then continue with a sermon to the heart. We find David reminding himself of who God is and what God has done. The result is that fear turns to faith, and pain turns to praise. In 1 Samuel 27:1, David let his heart speak and found despair. Now David speaks to his heart and finds strength. He turns to God’s word in the form of direction from the Urim and Thummim in the ephod (**30:7**). The LORD tells him to pursue the Amalekites and promises David that he will “succeed in the rescue” (**v 8**).

So David sets off after the Amalekite raiders with 600 men. 200 are left behind because they are too exhausted to continue (**v 9-10**). The remainder find an Egyptian slave who has been abandoned by the Amalekites and who leads them to his former masters (**v 11-15**). They find the Amalekites “eating, drinking and revelling” (**v 16**). Perhaps they are too full and too drunk to fight properly. Certainly none of them get away (**v 17**).

The Amalekites had attacked Israel soon after they left Egypt, picking off the stragglers (Deuteronomy 25:17-19; 1 Samuel 15:2). So they were singled out for judgment by God. In chapter 15, King Saul was given this task, but he had failed to complete it. Now it is David who completes it.

Everything is recovered: “nothing was missing” (**30:18-20**). Those who had wanted to stone David now recognise that the plunder is his (**v 20**). It is a total turnaround.

Some of David’s men, however, do not want a share to go to the 200 who were left behind (**v 21-22**). But David proves himself to be a generous king who dispenses gifts (**v 23-25**). The reason David can be generous is that (like Abraham in Genesis 16) he believes the battle belongs to the LORD, and therefore the plunder belongs to him too. In 1 Samuel **30:23-24**, David refers to his soldiers as his brothers. Moses had said the king was to be one from “among your brothers” and warned against the king thinking of himself as above his brothers (Deuteronomy 17:15, 20, ESV). God’s king is exalted, but he is also to be alongside his subjects. It is what we see embodied in the most glorious, and yet also most humble King of all, who is not ashamed to call his subjects his brothers and sisters (Hebrews 2:11, 17; Mark 3:33-34).

Samuel had warned that the king would take, take, take (1 Samuel 8:10-18). But David is a king who gives, gives, gives. He *gives* to the men who fought with him. He *gives* to the ones left behind. And in **30:26-31**, he *gives* to the leaders of Judah, saying: “Here is a gift for you from the plunder of the LORD’s enemies” (**v 26**). He is a generous ruler.

David is a pointer to Jesus, the King who gives, gives, gives to his subjects. Jesus gave himself for the church (Ephesians 5:25). In so doing, he has bound the strong man (Satan) and plundered his house (Mark 3:27). We are that plunder and he gives us our freedom.

The irony is that in some ways David is like those men who were left behind because, while this is happening, the army of Israel is fighting the Philistines. David is left behind in the sense that he is not involved in the

battles of God's people. Yet he is the one who will profit from this battle. Saul will be killed and David will receive the kingdom as a spoil of war.

Saul's Fall

In 1 Samuel chapter 31, the action returns again to Saul, taking in what will prove to be his last stand on Mount Gilboa. The story of the battle is told in just one verse: "Now the Philistines fought against Israel; the Israelites fled before them, and many fell dead on Mount Gilboa" (**v 1**). From then on the focus is on Saul. The Philistines pursue him, killing three of his sons, including Jonathan (**v 2**). Saul himself is fatally wounded (**v 3**).

Saul asks his armour-bearer to finish him off because otherwise "these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me" (**v 4**). But the armour-bearer is too frightened to do it, so Saul falls on his own sword, to be followed by his armour-bearer (**v 5**). It is a shattering defeat—the king and his three sons killed in one battle (**v 6**)—and the Philistines not only rout the Israelite army, but occupy the towns of the Jordan River valley and everywhere along its eastern side (**v 7**).

The phrase "uncircumcised fellow(s)" has been used only twice before in 1 Samuel. Jonathan uses it before defeating the Philistines against overwhelming odds (14:6). David uses it before defeating the Philistine giant (17:26). But now Saul uses it as he is about to be defeated by the Philistines (**31:4**).

Saul's suicide is symbolic. The Philistines did not remove him from his throne; David did not remove him from his throne (he refused to do so); Saul did it himself. He fashioned his own downfall through his faithlessness and disobedience. This was then confirmed by his suicide.

In 1 Samuel 17, David refused the weapons of Saul and instead relied on

God. In his speech to Goliath, he explicitly rejected the need of weapons. Now Saul dies by those very same weapons. Saul's armour is placed in the temple of the Philistines (**31:8-10**). Perhaps it has returned home, for Saul's attitude to military power has always been Philistine. But perhaps it is a reminder of when the ark was brought into Dagon's temple in chapter 5, and therefore a reminder that God can bring victory out of defeat.

The men of Jabesh Gilead remember how Saul had helped them in 11:1-11 and, presumably at some risk to themselves, recover Saul's body from its public humiliation on the wall of Beth Shan (**31:11-13**).

And so the book ends where it began, with the Philistines winning a victory and the death of Israel's leader along with his sons.

Four times in this final chapter, the word "fall" is used. Israel's army "fell dead on Mount Gilboa" (**v 1**). "Saul took his own sword and fell on it" (**v 4**). His armour-bearer also "fell on his sword" (**v 5**). Finally, the Philistines find "Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa" (**v 8**).

The LORD Brings Low and He Exalts

The book of 1 Samuel opens with the song of Hannah, in which she sings:

*"The LORD kills and brings to life;
he brings down to **Sheol** and raises up.
The LORD makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low and he exalts."* (2:6-7, ESV)

The song describes a series of reversals (v 3-10a). In most cases two sides of the reversal are identified. The verdicts of this world are reversed and the statuses of this world are switched. The book of Samuel (remembering that

1 and 2 Samuel were originally one book) also ends with a song—the song of David in 2 Samuel 22, where he again picks up this theme of reversals. The theme of his exaltation runs throughout 2 Samuel 22, and reversals are explicit in verses 28 and 48-49: “You save the humble, but your eyes are on the haughty to bring them low ... He is the God who avenges me, who puts the nations under me, who sets me free from my enemies. You exalted me above my foes; from a violent man you rescued me.”

David’s last words also pick up this theme. David describes himself as “the man exalted by the Most High” (2 Samuel 23:1) or “the man who was raised on high” (ESV).

There is a third song in the middle of Samuel, David’s lament for Saul in 2 Samuel 1. The repeated refrain of that song is: “How the mighty have fallen!” (1:19, 25, 27). It picks up the language of falling from 1 Samuel 31.

This theme is reinforced by the physical descriptions of Saul and David. The writer is not normally interested in describing people’s physical appearance so when he does it must be significant. The first time we are introduced to Saul we are told that he is “a head taller than anyone else” (9:2). The first time we are introduced to David he is referred to simply as “the youngest”, though the word can mean “smallest” (16:11). Saul is quite literally higher than any of his brothers in Israel and David is smaller than any of his brothers, at least in the house of Jesse. But by the end of the story Saul has fallen to the ground (**31:4, 8**). Meanwhile David has become “the man exalted by the Most High” (2 Samuel 23:1).

So the theme of the three songs can be summarised as:

1 Samuel 2 — God reverses

2 Samuel 1 — The mighty are fallen (the house of Saul)

2 Samuel 22 — The lowly are raised (the house of David)

As we have seen, the action of these final chapters switches between Saul

and David. There are two kings in Israel with two kingdoms, two courts and two armies. One is on a downwards trajectory that will end with his fall on the battlefield. The other is on an upwards trajectory that will end with his enthronement as king. Which would you follow?

In the world today there are two kingdoms—the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of this world. It often looks as if the kingdom of Christ is on a downward trajectory, especially in the western world. But faith trusts the promises of God. David’s story so far is a lesson that worldly status is not all that it may seem. Those who are high are not always those with a future. “The LORD ... brings low and he exalts” (2:6-7, ESV). The kingdom of Christ will triumph. At the end of history, the choirs of heaven will sing: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15).

There are two kingdoms—the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of this world. Which will you follow?

Questions for reflection

1. As you look back on your life as a Christian, can you see periods when you felt at the time that God was not doing very much, but now you can see how he was doing great things?
2. In times of crisis, do you look to your own strength, or to the Lord's? How can you actively do the latter?
3. Will you follow the kingdom of Christ? What evidence does your life give of your decision?

PART TWO

It is an intriguing exercise to imagine the book of Samuel being “published” for the first time. How would it have been viewed by its original readers? What reviews would it have received in the literary supplements? How would it have been received by the king? By the people?

Samuel is a preached history or an annotated story. In other words, it is real history, but it is more than a record of events. 1 Chronicles 29:29 says: “As for the events of King David’s reign, from beginning to end, they are written in the records of Samuel the seer, the records of Nathan the prophet and the records of Gad the seer”. There were other historical annals. The writer of Samuel is doing more than creating a historical record. He is writing with a purpose.

It is often suggested that the book of Samuel is a justification for the Davidic dynasty. Why is Israel’s greatest king her second king? At first sight there is a case for seeing David as a **usurper**. Saul is appointed king but David takes his place, deposing the Saulite dynasty. So 1 – 2 Samuel was written to defend the founder of the Davidic dynasty from this charge.

There is much that fits this theory that Samuel is a justification of Davidic rule. There is a big emphasis on David honouring the house of Saul, refusing to seize power and waiting for God to give him the kingdom.

But Saul is not portrayed as an archetypal “baddie”. There is a lot about his psychological turmoil. More significantly, the picture of David is mixed. He is presented as a flawed character, heading a flawed dynasty. We see hints of this in 1 Samuel, but far more in 2 Samuel 11 – 20. If this is simply a justification of David and the Davidic dynasty, why the story of Bathsheba (chapters 11 – 12)? The book will conclude in 2 Samuel 24 with a story of failure by David. The Davidic dynasty turns out to be flawed like the Saulite dynasty. Rape and civil war are the epitome of decline at the end of Judges.

They will be repeated in David's reign (2 Samuel 13 and 15 – 20). It is more complex than a pro-Davidic polemic.

It is important to recognise that the trajectory of the book is not from Saul to David, but from no monarchy to monarchy. The book does not start at 1 Samuel 9 with the anointing of Saul. It starts at chapter 1, without a king. It starts with a barren woman who speaks of a coming king (2:10).

Both historically and within the Hebrew **canon**, 1 Samuel is preceded by Judges 21:25: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit". This is the situation that Samuel addresses. Moreover, the book of Judges might lead us to think of human kingship as a bad thing. In Judges 8, Gideon acts like a king, and it leads to trouble. In Judges 9, Abimelek seizes the crown, and it is a disaster. Yet we end the book of Samuel with a king.

Samuel presents us with three options:

1. No rule or self-rule (Judges 21:25)
2. Rule through a human king—a king like those of the nations
3. God's rule through God's king.

In 1 – 2 Samuel, we move through the options from no rule, to a king like those of the nations, to God's king. The complication is that God's king keeps slipping from #3 back to #2.

So this is more than simply a justification for monarchy. It is also a meditation on how monarchy should work. It raises the question of whether monarchy is really a good thing for Israel. The answer appears to be: *Yes, when you have a good king ruling under God's kingship.* As and when the descendants of David follow his good example (to the extent that it is good), then there will be peace for God's people. David becomes the measure by which future kings are assessed.

So for its first readers, Samuel was written to emphasise two themes:

1. *David's son is a king to follow.* If 1 Samuel is an “apology”, it is for the idea of a king who is very unlikely, who comes from the margins—a king like David (and ultimately like Jesus). God’s covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7 seals this status. So Samuel is a call to follow David’s son.
2. *David is an example to follow.* The book exemplifies two key principles. First, “the LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness” (2 Samuel 22:25). The covenant loyalty of David to God is repeatedly emphasised. Second, the LORD “brings low and he exalts” (1 Samuel 2:7, ESV). This is exemplified in the repeated reversals. So Samuel is a call to the subsequent sons of David, and to all Israel, to humble themselves before God, remain loyal to his covenant and trust him to deliver them.

David and Humanity

When God makes his covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7, David responds: “And as if this were not enough in your sight, Sovereign LORD, you have also spoken about the future of the house of your servant—and this decree, Sovereign LORD, is for a mere human!” (v 19). The end of that phrase can equally well be rendered: “This decree, Sovereign LORD, is for the human race” (NIV2011 footnote) or: “This is instruction for mankind, O Lord God!” (ESV).

It is literally *torah ha’adam*: torah, or law or covenant, for Adam or for humanity. The word *adam* is the name of the first man, but also a term for humanity because Adam was the representative of humanity. God dealt with humanity in Adam (as Paul explains in Romans 5:12-21). What Adam did, he did on our behalf, and what God did to Adam is true for us all. Now God will deal with humanity through his king. The king becomes our representative. The future of David’s house is the future of humanity. This covenant is how God will save humanity. God is making a covenant or

contract himself to save humanity through David's son—indeed, God is covenanting to adopt humanity through David's son. Those who are “in” the Messiah rather than “in” the first Adam will be God's sons, just as the Messiah is God's Son.

The focus of God's purpose moves from humanity to Israel to the king. But always, the intent is to move back in the other direction. The king brings blessing to Israel, who bring blessing to humanity. Or we can think of this in terms of representation. Humanity is represented by Adam and then by Israel. Then Israel is represented by her king.

This all reaches its climax in Jesus. Jesus is the true representative and the true Son. He is the ultimate Messiah. He is the true Adam, the true Israel, the true David. Moreover Adam, Israel, and David's descendant are all described in the Bible as the “son of God” (Luke 3:38; Exodus 4:22-23; 2 Samuel 7:14).

So David is like the new Adam. He is the prototype of the representative figure through whom humanity will be redeemed—the king who will restore the reign of humanity that old Adam forsook.

If this is true of David, what does that make Saul? Saul is a type of the first Adam (the representative who fails). In 1 Samuel 11, Saul defeats the Ammonite King Nahash—“snake”. Saul looks as if he might be the new Adam, the promised Snake-Crusher. But in 1 Samuel 13 – 15 he “falls”; and his falls are accompanied with Adam-like excuses. Saul turns out not to be the visitation of the new Adam, but the old Adam revisited.

As we have seen, just as Saul faced a Nahash, so David also faces a snake. Goliath wore a coat of (literally) “scales of bronze” (17:5). Presumably it was overlapping plates of metal that looked like scales, but the description suggests he is a reptile, and David's justification for being able to fight him is based on his track record of defeating animals (v 34-37). Adam was to rule the animals, but his rule was subverted by the snake. Now David will reassert the rule of humanity over an animal by defeating a snake-like man.

And again, as we have seen, David has a period of testing in the wilderness. “David stayed in the wilderness strongholds and in the hills of the Desert of Ziph” (23:14). The next three stories all begin with a reminder that David is in the wilderness (24:1; 25:1; 26:1-2). These three stories represent three temptations for David to seize power or to act like a vengeful king. And three times, David avoids falling into temptation, albeit only just! In 24:4, he cuts off the corner of Saul’s robe, an act that causes him to be “conscience-stricken” (v 5) because the last time a robe was torn, it was a symbol of the kingdom being torn from Saul (15:27-29). In chapter 25, David relies on Abigail to keep his kingship from bloodguilt. Abigail acts, she explains, so that: “When the LORD has fulfilled for my lord every good thing he promised concerning him and has appointed him ruler over Israel, my lord will not have on his conscience the staggering burden of needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself” (v 30-31).

When Adam fell, God promised a new Adam through whom he would restore humanity. In the promises to Abraham, God focused his saving purposes on Israel. Israel would be the nation through whom God saved humanity. With the rise of kingship in Israel and the covenant with David, God’s saving purposes are focused on the king. The king becomes the one through whom God will redeem Israel and therefore through whom he will redeem the world. The king is the son of God, who will redeem Israel the son of God, who will redeem the race of Adam the son of God. David is a type of the second Adam. He points forward to Jesus, the messianic King, the true Israel and the second Adam.

David and Christians

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ is repeatedly seen as the new David, the successor in whom the Davidic covenant is fulfilled. But through this representation, the Davidic covenant is also applied to Christians—those

who are in Christ.

We see this, for example, in 2 Corinthians 6:14 – 7:1. Paul warns Christians: “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers”. “What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?” he asks. “For we are the temple of the living God” (v 14, 16). He then reinforces our distinctive status with a series of quotes from the Old Testament. His final quote is from the covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7:14. “As God has said ... ‘I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.’ Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Corinthians 6:16, 18 – 7:1).

What is striking is the way that Paul amends the original quotation. He transforms the reference to a son (singular) into a reference to sons (plural) and adds a reference to daughters. He changes the promise that the king will be God’s son (singular) into a promise of many sons and daughters. The promise for the king has become quite explicitly a promise for all God’s people.

Likewise Psalm 2 (which itself quotes and develops 2 Samuel 7:14) is applied to the first-century church in Thyatira: “To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—that one ‘will rule them with an iron sceptre and will dash them to pieces like pottery’—just as I have received authority from my Father” (Revelation 2:26-27, quoting Psalm 2:9). Jesus is the ultimate Christ, of whom Psalm 2 speaks, and in whom the Davidic covenant finds fulfilment. But he gives his authority to his people, so we reign over the nations. In this age, we do this (as Revelation 12:11 makes clear) through our proclamation of the gospel and our faithful witness even to death.

As we have seen, in 1 John 2:18-27 John warns his readers of the coming antichrist. Meanwhile, those who have abandoned the church are already “antichrists”. The spirit of antichrist is already at work in those who have left the church because they deny the truth about Jesus. In this context, John

says his readers “have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth” (v 20). Remember the word “christ” or “messiah” means “anointed One”. So believers are “christs” because we have a real anointing, in contrast to the counterfeit anointing of the antichrists (v 27). There is a coming antichrist, with many antichrists with an anointing that is a counterfeit. There is a coming Christ, with many christs (Christ-ians) with an anointing of the Spirit.

So the promises explicitly given to David and the promises implicitly embodied in his life point both to Jesus the Christ and all who are in Christ. We reign as christs in Christ as we extend his reign through the proclamation of the gospel.

All this is pictured in the rise and fall of King Saul, who looked like the christ and was not; and the choice, struggles and reign of King David, who looked quite unlike a christ, yet was the greatest king of Israel until *the* Christ, the Lord Jesus. In this sense, the whole of the history of God’s people and of the world, from the coming of the first Adam to the return of the second Adam, is captured in the tale of two kings that is the book of 1 Samuel. We end with one having fallen on his sword; the other poised to reign. We end with one showing us the futility of disobeying God and resisting his purposes; the other pointing us to the most exalted, most humble, most wise and most loving King of God’s people of all—Jesus of Nazareth.

Questions for reflection

1. How would you sum up the message of 1 Samuel in a single sentence?
2. How has 1 Samuel shown you who Jesus is, and moved you to appreciate and worship him more?
3. How are you going to follow David's example in your own life?

Glossary

Aaron: Moses' brother; the first priest to serve in the tabernacle. Israel's priests were drawn from his descendants (see Exodus 28 – 29).

Accommodation: compromise.

Active/passive voice: grammatical terms. In the active voice, the main subject of the sentence is acting, eg: "The man [subject] ate [active verb] two hamburgers". In the passive voice, the subject of the sentence is acted upon, eg: "two hamburgers [the subject] were eaten [passive verb] by the man".

Adjudicate: make a judgment.

Aesop's fables: a collection of stories told by an ancient Greek, Aesop. Most have a moral message.

Ambiguous: unclear.

Anakim: a people group who once lived in the south of Palestine, known for their height and identified with the Nephilim.

Ancient of Days: a name for God which refers to his eternal nature.

Annals: records. In this case it would include the books of 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles.

Antipathy: deep dislike.

Anti-theists: people actively opposed to the belief that God exists.

Apologetic: reasoned argument.

Arcane: of interest to, or understood by, few people.

Ark of God: a chest which contained the tablets inscribed with the ten commandments (Exodus 25). It was a symbol of God's presence with the Israelites.

Atonement: a way of coming back into friendship with someone.

Auspicious: a sign of future success.

Baals and Ashtoreths: false pagan gods that were worshipped by the Canaanites living around Israel.

Barren: unable to have children.

Blasphemy: disrespecting or mocking God.

Cast lots: making a decision based on a seemingly random outcome, like the toss of a coin. However, in the Old Testament casting lots with the Urim and Thummim was a God-given way of receiving his guidance.

Canon: the collection of texts which are accepted as God's word.

Consecrated: set apart as holy.

Corporately: as a group.

Covenant: a binding agreement between two parties.

Credibility: the right to be believed or thought of as trustworthy.

Credibility gap: obstacle to belief.

Cryptic: having a meaning which is not clear.

Diffident: shy, lacking confidence.

Dissolute: morally lax.

Dissonance: clash.

Elixir: a magical potion.

Elizabeth: the mother of John the Baptist. She was unable to have children for many years until she miraculously became pregnant with John as an old woman (see Luke 1).

Ephod: a special tunic worn by priests while they were ministering in the temple (see Exodus 28).

Epitome: perfect example.

Etiquette: polite behaviour.

Fornication: sex outside of marriage.

Frenetic: energetic; wild.

Fugitive: someone in hiding to escape arrest.

Genealogy: a list of ancestors.

Grace: undeserved, overflowing generosity. In this context, the privilege of being called God's people.

Heifer: a young female cow.

Hereditary: passed on from father to son.

Humanist: a worldview which sees humanity, not any divine or supernatural being, as supreme.

Idiom: an expression which has a different meaning to that of the individual words. Eg: "It's raining cats and dogs."

Irony: something which is the opposite of how one would expect it to be.

Jeremiah: Old Testament prophet.

King-designate: someone who has been appointed king but is not yet ruling as king.

Levitical laws: the laws God had given to his people, recorded in Leviticus.

LORD's house: the tabernacle.

Lyre: a stringed instrument, a bit like a harp.

Metaphorically: a metaphor is where one thing is a symbol for a deeper truth.

Microcosm: something which pictures in miniature the features of something bigger.

Missional: something that communicates or promotes God's message to non-believers.

Monarchical: having a king or queen as leader.

Mustered: assembled.

Myriads: a very great number.

Narrative arc: the over-arching plot of a story.

Nephilim: giants (see Genesis 6:4).

New atheists: believe that there is no God, and that religion should be actively attacked. Famous new atheists include Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris.

Offspring: children or descendants.

Parody: a poor, sometimes comic, imitation.

Penance, masses and indulgences: Rituals in Roman Catholicism which were believed to reduce the amount of time a soul would have to spend being punished in purgatory after death. Penance involved confessing sin to the priest and carrying out an "act of penance"; masses were services of holy communion; indulgences were donations to the church.

Pluralist: a belief system that allows for more than one right answer, or contradictory "truths" (see Relativism).

Pseudoscience: appearing to be scientific, but in reality a sham.

Reductive: over-simplifying.

Relativism: the idea that there is no absolute right and wrong. Instead, right and wrong change, depending on the situation.

Samson: a man who led Israel during the time of the judges, and was also born to a previously infertile woman (see Judges 13 – 16). He is most often remembered for his supernatural strength.

Sanctuary: the part of the tabernacle where the ark was kept.

Sanhedrin: Jewish religious court.

Satirists: people who use humour to mock the faults of others.

Secular: attitudes or activities that have no religious influence.

Self-renunciation: self-rejection.

Sheol: Hebrew word for the underworld, where the souls of the dead go.

Situational ethics: deciding whether something is right or wrong based on the particular situation or context.

Sovereign: to have supreme authority / be the supreme ruler.

Street pastor: someone who goes into the community to help people at night, typically around clubs and pubs in urban areas.

Tabernacle: a large, tented area where the Israelites worshipped God, and where his presence symbolically dwelt (see Exodus 26; 40).

Theology: the study of what is true about God.

Trajectory: path, course or pattern.

Uncircumcised: God told the men among his people in the Old Testament to be circumcised as a way to show physically that they knew and trusted him,

and belonged to the people of God (see Genesis 17). So to be uncircumcised was a sign of not being part of God's people.

Urim and Thummim: Used for receiving guidance from God and kept in the breastplate of the high priest's ephod (see Exodus 28:15-30).

Usurper: someone who takes power by force, without the right to do so.

Yahweh: the name by which God revealed himself to Moses (Exodus 3:13-14). Literally, it means: "I am who I am" or: "I will be who I will be". Most English-language Bibles translate it as "LORD".

Appendix: Samuel and the Psalms

Here is a list of psalms explicitly linked to the life of David in 1 and 2 Samuel by their superscription or content.

Psalm 3	David's flight from Absalom	2 Samuel 15 – 16
Psalm 18	David's deliverance from Saul	1 Samuel 23 – 27
Psalm 34	David pretends to be mad	1 Samuel 21
Psalm 51	David is confronted over his adultery	2 Samuel 11 – 12
Psalm 52	David's betrayal by Doeg	1 Samuel 22
Psalm 54	David's betrayal by the Ziphites	1 Samuel 23
Psalm 56	David seized at Gath by the Philistines	1 Samuel 21
Psalm 57	David's escape from Saul into the cave	1 Samuel 22
Psalm 59	David's escape when Saul sends men to	1 Samuel 19

	his house	
Psalms 60	David's wars with the Arameans and Edomites	2 Samuel 8 – 10
Psalms 63	David in the Desert of Judah	1 Samuel 23 – 24
Psalms 78	God's covenant with David	2 Samuel 7
Psalms 89	God's covenant with David	2 Samuel 7
Psalms 132	God's covenant with David	2 Samuel 7
Psalms 142	David's escape from Saul into the cave	1 Samuel 22
1 Samuel 19	David's escape when Saul sends men to his house	Psalms 59
1 Samuel 21	David pretends to be mad	Psalms 34
1 Samuel 21	David seized at Gath by the Philistines	Psalms 56
1 Samuel 22	David's betrayal by Doeg	Psalms 52
1 Samuel 22	David's escape from Saul into the cave	Psalms 57
1 Samuel 22	David's escape from Saul into the cave	Psalms 142

1 Samuel 23	David's betrayal by the Ziphites	Psalms 54
1 Samuel 23 – 24	David in the Desert of Judah	Psalms 63
1 Samuel 23 – 27	David's deliverance from Saul	Psalms 18
2 Samuel 11 – 12	David is confronted over his adultery	Psalms 51
2 Samuel 15 – 16	David's flight from Absalom	Psalms 3
2 Samuel 7	God's covenant with David	Psalms 78
2 Samuel 7	God's covenant with David	Psalms 89
2 Samuel 7	God's covenant with David	Psalms 132
2 Samuel 8 – 10	David's wars with the Arameans and Edomites	Psalms 60

Appendix: Israel in the time of 1 Samuel



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Footnotes

1. Words in grey are defined in the Glossary. [Return](#)
2. All 1 Samuel verse references being looked at in each chapter are in bold. [Return](#)



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Table of Contents

[Series Preface](#)

[Introduction to 1 Samuel](#)

[1. A Coming King](#)

[2. A Coming Priest and Prophet](#)

[3. The Weight of Glory](#)

[4. A King like the Nations](#)

[5. King Saul](#)

[6. Adam Revisited](#)

[7. The Shepherd King](#)

[8. Facing Giants](#)

[9. Taking Sides](#)

[10. The Wilderness Years](#)

[11. Testing times](#)

[12. A Word from the Grave](#)

[13. How the Mighty have Fallen](#)

[Glossary](#)

[Appendix: Samuel and the Psalms](#)

[Appendix: Israel in the time of 1 Samuel](#)

[Bibliography](#)