THE BOOK OF 1 SAMUEL

The King After God's Heart

1 Samuel, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King After God's Heart: The Book of 1 Samuel, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” You probably know at least one story from 1 Samuel. A shepherd boy, a sling, five smooth stones, and a giant who never saw it coming. Maybe you’ve heard sermons about beating the giants in your life. Maybe you’ve even rolled your eyes at them.

But David and Goliath is just one chapter in a much bigger, messier, more surprising book. 1 Samuel is the story of how Israel got its first kings. It’s full of drama: a woman who prays so hard the priest thinks she’s drunk, a boy who hears God calling his name in the middle of the night, a sacred box that knocks over a pagan idol, a tall, handsome king who falls apart, a best friendship that costs a prince his throne, a fugitive who refuses to kill his enemy, a wise woman who talks an angry warrior out of murder, and a midnight visit to a medium.

Underneath all of it is one big question: what kind of leader does God want? Israel wanted a king who looked the part. God wanted a king with the right heart. That question still matters, for the leaders you follow and for the kind of person you’re becoming.

Let’s go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through 1 Samuel in ten chapters: Hannah and Eli’s house (1 Samuel 1–2), the call of Samuel (3), the ark captured and

returned (4–7), Israel's demand for a king and the rise of Saul (8–12), Saul's downfall (13–15), David anointed (16), David and Goliath (17), David, Jonathan, and Saul's jealousy (18–23), David's mercy and Abigail's wisdom (24–27), and Saul's last night and death (28–31).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book 1 Samuel is, where it fits, and the world it came from. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as what to make of the command to destroy the Amalekites, how tall Goliath really was, and whether it was really Samuel who appeared at Endor, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes 1 Samuel in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the ninth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

1 Samuel raises real questions. I've presented the main views fairly on the command concerning the Amalekites (with reference to the herem passages in Deuteronomy and Joshua), on Goliath's height in the Masoretic Text compared with the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint, on the evil spirit that troubled Saul, and on whether the figure at Endor was really Samuel. I'd encourage you to share your own church's view with your teen, and to explain why other Christians see it differently.

Some material is heavy. Eli's sons abused their position as priests. Saul's dark moods and violent jealousy lead him to throw a spear at his own son. And the book ends with Saul taking his own life on Mount Gilboa. These are handled with compassion and without graphic detail. Real Talk and Safety boxes address mental health and dark moods (encouraging readers to talk to a trusted adult or a doctor), leaders who misuse power, family anger, revenge, jealousy,

and friendship, and point readers to the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline and to Childhelp (1-800-422-4453) where relevant.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament sees David, the anointed king from Bethlehem, pointing to Jesus the Messiah, the Anointed One, while acknowledging that Jewish readers treasure 1 Samuel in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will see in 1 Samuel a God who looks at the heart, and who keeps His promises even when His people's leaders fail.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What Kind of Book Is This?

1 Samuel is history told as a story, with real people, real places, and a lot of drama. It's named after Samuel, the prophet who anointed Israel's first two kings, although Samuel dies before the book ends. In the Hebrew Bible, 1 and 2 Samuel were originally one book. It was split in two later, probably because it was too long to fit on one scroll.

Where It Fits

1 Samuel picks up right where Judges and Ruth leave off. Judges ends with the words there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes. Ruth ends with the name David. 1 Samuel tells how Israel moved from the chaotic days of the judges to a kingdom, roughly around 1100 to 1010 BC. Samuel is the last of the judges, Saul is the first king, and David is the king God chooses to replace him. 2 Samuel continues David's story.

Who Wrote It?

The book doesn't name its author. Jewish tradition says Samuel wrote the first part, and the prophets Nathan and Gad finished it, and 1 Chronicles mentions records kept by all three. Since Samuel's death is recorded in chapter 25, someone else at least completed it. Many scholars think the book was put together from older sources, like a story of the ark and a story of David's rise, and edited as part

of a larger history running from Deuteronomy through Kings. Christians with different views agree that it is God's Word.

The World of 1 Samuel

Israel was a loose group of tribes with no capital, no standing army, and no king. Their worship center was at Shiloh, where the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant were kept. Their biggest threat was the Philistines, a powerful people who lived in five cities along the coast and had the technology to make iron weapons. Israel was outgunned. That's the background to almost every story in this book: a small, struggling people trying to survive, and asking who would save them.

Three Big Characters

Samuel is the prophet, priest, and judge who bridges the old era and the new. Saul is the king the people wanted, tall, handsome, and impressive, who starts well and falls apart. David is the king God wanted, a shepherd boy with a heart for God, who spends most of this book running for his life. Watching how these three respond to God is the key to the whole book.

Hard Stories and Safety Notes

1 Samuel includes war, abuse of power, violent jealousy, mental anguish, and the death by suicide of Israel's first king. Including a story in the Bible doesn't mean God approves of everything in it. When we come to these stories, you'll find a box with a safety note. Here's what they say: you are not alone, dark feelings can get better with help, and it's never weak to ask for help. Talk to a trusted adult or a doctor. If you are ever thinking about suicide, in the United

States you can call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time. In an emergency, call 911.

The Map

Chapter 1 (1 Samuel 1–2): Hannah's prayer.

Chapter 2 (1 Samuel 3): Speak, LORD.

Chapter 3 (1 Samuel 4–7): The glory departs.

Chapter 4 (1 Samuel 8–12): A king like all the nations.

Chapter 5 (1 Samuel 13–15): Saul's downfall.

Chapter 6 (1 Samuel 16): The shepherd boy.

Chapter 7 (1 Samuel 17): David and Goliath.

Chapter 8 (1 Samuel 18–23): Friends and enemies.

Chapter 9 (1 Samuel 24–27): Mercy and wisdom.

Chapter 10 (1 Samuel 28–31): Saul's last night.

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CHAPTER 1

Hannah's Prayer

1 Samuel 1–2

The story of Israel's first kings doesn't begin in a palace or on a battlefield. It begins in a family that's hurting. A man named Elkanah has two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah has children. Hannah has none. And every year, when the family travels to the tabernacle at Shiloh to worship, Peninnah makes sure Hannah feels it. The Bible says she provoked her "severely," mocking her until she cried and couldn't eat.

Elkanah loves Hannah. He gives her a double portion of the sacrifice meal, and he tries to comfort her. "Am I not better to you than ten sons?" he asks. It's sweet, but it kind of misses the point. Hannah's pain isn't something a husband's love can fix.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Two Wives?**

The Bible records that some men in ancient Israel had more than one wife, but it never presents that as God's plan. From Genesis on, God's design was one man and one woman. And every time the Bible tells a story about a family with multiple wives, it's a story about jealousy, rivalry, and pain: Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah, and now Hannah and Peninnah. The Bible doesn't always stop to say this is wrong. It just shows you what happens. In Hannah's world, not being able to have children also brought shame. People often assumed it meant God was displeased with you. So Hannah wasn't just sad. She felt rejected, by people and maybe by God.

One year at Shiloh, after the meal, Hannah goes to the tabernacle alone. "She was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly." She makes God a promise: if He gives her a son, she will give him back to the LORD for his whole life, and no razor will ever touch his head, the sign of a Nazirite, like Samson.

Eli, the old priest, is sitting by the doorpost watching her. Her lips are moving, but no sound is coming out, because she's praying silently. In that culture, people usually prayed out loud. So Eli jumps to a conclusion: she must be drunk. "How long will you be drunk? Get rid of your wine!"

Imagine pouring your heart out to God and having a religious leader accuse you of being drunk. Hannah doesn't storm off. She answers honestly: "No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit. I have not been drinking wine or strong drink, but I poured out my soul before the LORD." Eli realizes his mistake and blesses her. "Go in peace; and may the God of Israel grant your petition that you have asked of him."

And something changes in Hannah before anything changes in her situation. She goes back, eats, and "her facial expression wasn't sad any more." She doesn't have a baby yet. She doesn't have a guarantee. But she has given her pain to God, and she's walking away lighter.

> **REAL TALK** **Pouring Out Your Soul**
>
> Hannah's prayer wasn't polite or polished. She cried. She bargained. She didn't use fancy words. She just poured out her soul. That's what prayer can look like when you're hurting. You don't have to pray in a certain voice or with certain words. You can tell God exactly what hurts and exactly what you want. And notice that Hannah was misunderstood by the person who should have understood her best. If you've ever opened up and been brushed off or

> judged, you're not alone. Don't let it stop you from talking to God, and don't stop looking for people who will really listen.

God answers. Hannah has a son and names him Samuel, "Because I have asked him of the LORD." The name probably sounds like the Hebrew words for heard by God or asked of God. Every time she says his name, she remembers that God heard her.

Then Hannah keeps her promise, which might be the hardest part of the whole story. When Samuel is old enough to stop nursing, probably around three years old, she brings him to Shiloh and gives him to Eli to raise in the tabernacle. "I prayed for this child, and the LORD has given me my petition which I asked of him. Therefore I have also given him to the LORD."

That doesn't mean Hannah abandoned him. Chapter 2 says she made him a little robe every year and brought it when the family came to worship. You can picture her sewing a slightly bigger robe each year, thinking about how much he'd grown. Later, God blessed her with three more sons and two daughters.

When she gives Samuel to the LORD, Hannah sings. Her song is one of the great poems of the Bible. "My heart exults in the LORD!" she begins. And then: "There is no one as holy as the LORD, for there is no one besides you, nor is there any rock like our God."

The song turns the world upside down. God breaks the bows of the mighty and gives strength to the weak. The full go hungry, and the hungry are satisfied. The woman who couldn't have children now has many. "He raises up the poor out of the dust. He lifts up the needy from the dunghill to make them sit with princes." That's the theme of the whole book of 1 Samuel. God lifts up the lowly and brings down the proud. And at the very end of her song, Hannah

mentions something that doesn't exist yet in Israel: a king, God's anointed one.

A thousand years later, another young woman would sing a song very much like this one. When Mary found out she would be the mother of Jesus, she sang that God "has put down princes from their thrones, and has exalted the lowly." Mary knew Hannah's song. She saw that God was doing it again.

Then the story takes a dark turn. "Now the sons of Eli were wicked men. They didn't know the LORD." Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are priests at the tabernacle, and they're using their position to take whatever they want. When people bring sacrifices, the priests' servants grab the best meat before it's offered to God, and threaten people who object. "The sin of the young men was very great before the LORD; for the men despised the LORD's offering." Worse, they're sleeping with the women who served at the entrance of the tabernacle.

Eli hears about it. He's old, and he gives them a lecture. But "they didn't listen to the voice of their father." And Eli doesn't remove them. He lets them keep serving as priests. Later God says Eli honored his sons more than Him, because Eli and his family were getting fat off the stolen meat too.

SAFETY NOTE **When Leaders Misuse Their Power**

Hophni and Phinehas were religious leaders, and they used their position to take advantage of people, including women. Sadly, this still happens, sometimes even in churches, youth groups, schools, or teams. A leader having authority doesn't make it okay for them to pressure you, touch you, ask for secrets, or make you feel unsafe. If a leader, coach, teacher, or anyone else ever does something that feels wrong, it is not your fault, and you don't have to keep it secret. Tell a parent or another trusted adult. If that person

> doesn't help, tell someone else. In the United States, you can call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453, and in an emergency, call 911. God takes the abuse of power seriously, and so should we.

In the middle of this mess, the writer keeps cutting back to Samuel, like a camera switching scenes. Eli's sons are corrupt, but "The child Samuel grew on, and increased in favor both with the LORD and also with men." Luke uses almost the same words about Jesus as a boy. A new kind of leader is quietly growing up in the middle of a broken system.

It's worth asking why the writer gives us so much detail about Eli's sons. Part of the reason is to set up what's coming: the priesthood at Shiloh is rotten, and God is about to do something new. But there's also a warning in it. Hophni and Phinehas grew up in the tabernacle. They were surrounded by sacrifices, prayers, and holy things their whole lives. And yet "They didn't know the LORD." Being close to religious things isn't the same as knowing God. You can grow up in church, go to youth group every week, and know all the answers, and still never have a real relationship with Him. Samuel grew up in exactly the same place as Eli's sons, but he turned out completely different. The difference wasn't where they were. It was what was in their hearts.

The chapter ends with a warning. A prophet comes to Eli with a message from God: "those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me will be cursed." Eli's family will lose the priesthood, and both of his sons will die on the same day. God will raise up a faithful priest instead.

KEY VERSE

There is no one as holy as the LORD, for there is no one besides you, nor is there any rock like our God.

1 Samuel 2:2 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Hannah was mocked by Peninnah and misunderstood by Eli. How did she respond? What can you learn from her?
2. Hannah's face wasn't sad anymore even before she got pregnant. What changed?
3. Hannah's song says God lifts up the lowly and brings down the proud. Where have you seen that happen?
4. Eli knew his sons were doing wrong but didn't stop them. Why is it so hard to confront people we love?

TRY THIS *Find a quiet place this week and pour out your soul to God, honestly, about something that hurts. Don't worry about the words.*

CHAPTER 2

Speak, LORD

1 Samuel 3

Chapter 3 opens with a sad line: "The LORD's word was rare in those days. There were not many visions, then." God seemed quiet. The priests were corrupt, and the people weren't listening anyway. It had been a long time since anyone heard from God.

Samuel is still a boy, maybe around twelve, though the Bible doesn't say exactly. He serves in the tabernacle under Eli, who is now old and nearly blind. One night, Samuel is lying down near the ark of God, and the lamp of God, the oil lamp that burned in the tabernacle through the night, hasn't gone out yet. That little detail is a picture of Israel. The light is flickering, but it hasn't gone out.

Then, "The LORD called Samuel. He said, 'Here I am.'" Samuel jumps up and runs to Eli. "Here I am; for you called me." Eli says he didn't call and sends him back to bed. It happens again. Samuel runs to Eli again. Eli sends him back again.

The writer explains why Samuel is confused. Samuel didn't yet know the LORD, and the LORD's word hadn't yet been revealed to him. He's grown up in the tabernacle. He knows all the rituals. But he's never personally heard God. That's a little like a lot of kids who grow up in church. You can know all the songs, all the stories, and all the right answers and still not know God for yourself.

The third time, Eli finally figures it out. Give him credit. He may have failed as a father, but here he points Samuel in the right direction. "Go, lie down. It shall be, if he calls you, that you shall say, 'Speak, LORD; for your servant hears.'"

So Samuel goes back and lies down. And "The LORD came, and stood, and called as at other times, 'Samuel! Samuel!'" God calls him by name, twice. Samuel answers, "Speak; for your servant hears." Interestingly, he leaves out the word LORD. Maybe he was too nervous. Maybe he wasn't sure yet who was talking. But he's listening.

> **REAL TALK** **How Does God Speak Today?**
>
> Most people never hear God's voice out loud the way Samuel did. So how does God speak now? Christians believe the main way is through the Bible. Hebrews 1 says that God spoke in many ways in the past, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, Jesus. When you read Scripture, you're hearing God's word. Many Christians also believe God guides through prayer, the inner nudges of the Holy Spirit, the wise counsel of other believers, and the circumstances He arranges. Christians differ on how much to expect impressions or dreams today, but they agree on this: anything that claims to be from God has to line up with what He's already said in Scripture. The best way to learn to recognize God's voice is the way Samuel did. Show up, listen, and say, "Speak; for your servant hears."

What God tells Samuel is not a cute message for a kid. It's a hard one. God says He's about to do something in Israel that will make everyone's ears tingle. He's going to carry out His judgment on Eli's family, "because his sons brought a curse on themselves, and he didn't restrain them." The first message God gives Samuel is bad news about the man who raised him.

Samuel lies there until morning. Then he gets up and opens the doors of the tabernacle like he does every day, and he's afraid to tell Eli what he heard. Who would want to deliver that message?

But Eli calls him over and insists. Tell me everything. Don't hide anything. So Samuel does. "Samuel told him every bit, and hid nothing from him." Eli's response is surprisingly calm: "It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him." Some readers see this as humble acceptance. Others see it as tired resignation, a man who's given up on changing. Maybe it's both.

> **REAL TALK** **Telling the Hard Truth**
>
> Samuel had to tell someone he loved something they didn't want to hear. That's one of the hardest things anyone ever has to do. Maybe you've been in that spot: a friend making a dangerous choice, a family member who needs to hear something hard, or a situation where telling the truth will cost you. Samuel's example shows that honesty, said with respect, is a form of love. But be wise. You don't have to carry heavy truths alone. If someone is in danger, or if you know something serious, talk to a trusted adult. Telling the truth isn't snitching when someone could get hurt.

Think about what it took for Samuel to keep serving after that night. He still had to work for Eli every day. He still had to watch Hophni and Phinehas misbehave. He knew judgment was coming, and he couldn't do anything to stop it. But he kept showing up, opening the doors, and listening for God. Faithfulness often looks like that. Not a dramatic moment, but a long string of ordinary days doing the right thing in a place that isn't easy.

The chapter ends with Samuel growing up. "Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground." That means everything Samuel said in God's name came true. People all over Israel, from Dan in the north to Beersheba in the

south, recognize that Samuel is a real prophet of the LORD. God keeps appearing to him at Shiloh and speaking to him through His word.

Remember how the chapter started? God's word was rare. Now God is speaking again, and He's speaking through a kid who learned to listen.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Prophet, Priest, and Judge**
>
> Samuel ends up wearing three hats, more than almost anyone else in the Old Testament. He's a prophet, someone who speaks God's word to the people. He also offers sacrifices and leads worship like a priest, although he wasn't from Aaron's family, which has led to some discussion among scholars; he was from the tribe of Levi, according to 1 Chronicles. And he's the last of the judges, leading Israel and settling disputes, traveling in a circuit around the country every year. In a way, Samuel stands at the hinge of Israel's history. He'll be the one to anoint both of Israel's first kings.

There's one more detail worth noticing. Eli asked Samuel to tell him everything, and Samuel did. Then Eli accepted it, but he didn't seem to change anything. He didn't remove his sons. He didn't repent publicly. He didn't plead with God the way Moses or Abraham did when they heard about coming judgment. Hearing God's word is the first step, but it isn't the last. James, in the New Testament, says that someone who hears the word but doesn't do it is like a person who looks in a mirror, walks away, and immediately forgets what he looks like. Samuel heard and obeyed. Eli heard and shrugged. The difference between them wasn't how much they knew. It was what they did with what they knew.

It's also worth noticing how patient God was with Samuel. He called four times. He didn't get frustrated when Samuel ran to the wrong person. He didn't give up when Samuel didn't recognize His voice. If

you feel like you don't know how to hear God, or you've missed Him before, take heart. He's patient with learners.

You don't have to be an adult for God to use you. Samuel was a kid when God first spoke to him, and the message he carried changed the course of a nation. Paul would later tell his young friend Timothy not to let anyone look down on him because he was young. God has always been willing to speak to young people who are ready to listen.

> **REAL TALK** **Here I Am**
>
> Three times in this chapter, Samuel says the same two words: here I am. He says it to Eli, and finally he says it to God. It's the same answer Abraham gave when God called him, and Moses at the burning bush, and Isaiah when God asked who would go for Him. It's a simple way of saying, I'm available. I'm listening. Use me. You don't have to have your life figured out to say it. You don't need to know what God will ask. Samuel certainly didn't. You just need to be willing. Some of the most important moments in a life of faith start with nothing more complicated than a young person saying to God, here I am.

KEY VERSE

The LORD came, and stood, and called as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak; for your servant hears."

1 Samuel 3:10 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Samuel grew up in the tabernacle but didn't yet know the LORD. Can someone grow up in church and still not know God personally? What's the difference?
2. Eli failed as a father but helped Samuel hear God. What does that say about how God can use imperfect people?
3. Have you ever had to tell someone a hard truth? How did it go?
4. What helps you hear God more clearly? What makes it harder?

TRY THIS *Before you read your Bible this week, pray Samuel's prayer: "Speak; for your servant hears." Then write down one thing you sense God saying through what you read.*

CHAPTER 3

The Glory Departs

1 Samuel 4–7

War breaks out between Israel and the Philistines, and Israel loses about four thousand men. The elders are shocked. "Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines?" It's a good question. But instead of asking God, praying, or repenting, they come up with a plan. "Let's get the ark of the LORD's covenant out of Shiloh and bring it to us, that it may come among us and save us out of the hand of our enemies."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Ark of the Covenant**
>
> The ark was a wooden chest covered in gold, about four feet long, built in the days of Moses. On its lid were two golden cherubim, angel-like figures with outstretched wings. Inside were the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. The ark was the most sacred object in Israel, kept in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle, where God said He would meet with His people. It was a sign of His presence and His covenant. Yes, it's the same ark from the Indiana Jones movie, but the real ark wasn't a magical weapon. It belonged to God, and He couldn't be controlled.

Notice the wording. They said "it" may save us. Not He. They're treating the ark like a lucky charm, as if God's presence could be packed up and carried into battle to guarantee a win. They want God's power without God Himself.

When the ark arrives in the camp, with Eli's sons Hophni and Phinehas carrying it, the Israelites shout so loudly the ground shakes. The Philistines hear it and panic. A god has come into their camp! These are the gods who struck Egypt with plagues! But instead of running, they decide to fight harder.

And Israel loses again, much worse this time. Thirty thousand soldiers die. Hophni and Phinehas are killed, just as God had warned. And "God's ark was taken."

A messenger runs back to Shiloh with dirt on his head, a sign of mourning. Eli is ninety-eight years old and blind, sitting by the road, worried about the ark. When the messenger tells him the news, his sons' death and the ark's capture, Eli falls backward off his seat, breaks his neck, and dies. He had led Israel for forty years.

The news hits one more person. Phinehas's wife is pregnant and goes into labor when she hears it. As she is dying in childbirth, she names her son Ichabod, which means something like no glory or where is the glory? "The glory has departed from Israel; for God's ark has been taken."

It's one of the saddest moments in the book. Israel had treated God like a tool, and now it felt like He was gone.

> **REAL TALK** **God Isn't a Good-Luck Charm**
>
> Israel brought the ark into battle like a magic object. People still do this. We wear a cross for good luck, pray only before a big test, or go to church hoping it'll make things go our way, without actually caring what God wants. That's not faith. It's superstition. God isn't a vending machine or a rabbit's foot. He's a person, and He wants a relationship with you, not just a role in your plans. Ask yourself honestly: do I want God, or do I just want what God can do for me?

But here's the thing. The ark may be captured, but God isn't.

The Philistines carry the ark to Ashdod, one of their five cities, and put it in the temple of their god Dagon, right next to his statue. In the ancient world, that was like hanging a trophy on the wall. Our god beat your god.

The next morning, the people of Ashdod walk into the temple, and "Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the LORD's ark." Their god is lying face down, like a servant bowing before a king. So they pick him up and put him back in his place. Imagine having to help your god stand up.

The next morning, Dagon is down again, and this time his head and hands have broken off and are lying on the threshold. "Only Dagon's torso was intact." The writer is clearly enjoying this. The Philistines thought they'd captured Israel's God. Instead, Israel's God is knocking their god over in his own house.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Was Dagon?**
>
> Dagon was a major god of the Philistines and other peoples in the region. He was probably a god of grain and crops; the Hebrew word for grain, dagan, sounds like his name. An older idea that Dagon was half fish has mostly been abandoned by scholars. Samson pulled down a temple of Dagon in Judges 16, and now Dagon falls again. In both stories, the message is the same. The God of Israel isn't one god among many. He is the only true God, and idols can't stand before Him.

Then things get much worse for the Philistines. A plague of tumors breaks out in Ashdod. They send the ark to Gath, and the plague follows it. They send it to Ekron, and the people there scream, "Send the ark of the God of Israel away, and let it go again to its own place, that it not kill us and our people." The ark becomes the ultimate hot potato. Nobody wants it.

After seven months, the Philistines' priests come up with a plan. They put the ark on a new cart pulled by two cows that have just had calves, along with a guilt offering of gold. Normally, mother cows would refuse to leave their calves. If the cows head straight for Israel anyway, the Philistines will know it was really Israel's God who struck them. The cows walk straight down the road to the Israelite town of Beth Shemesh, mooing the whole way, without turning right or left.

The people of Beth Shemesh are thrilled at first. But some of them look into the ark, treating it carelessly, and many die. Their response echoes the Philistines': "Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?" God's holiness is not something to play around with. Finally, the ark is taken to the town of Kiriath Jearim, where it stays for twenty years.

Take a step back and look at what happened. Israel lost the ark because they treated God like a tool. The Philistines lost the battle with the ark because they treated Him like a trophy. The people of Beth Shemesh got in trouble because they treated Him like a curiosity. In every case, people were trying to handle God on their own terms. And in every case, God showed that He isn't something to be used, displayed, or poked at. He's the holy King of the universe. But notice too that He wasn't trying to stay away. He brought the ark home Himself, without any Israelite soldier lifting a finger. God was not lost. He was making a point, and then He came back to His people.

Those twenty years give Israel time to think. Eventually, the people start mourning and longing for the LORD. Samuel speaks to them: "If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you, and direct your

hearts to the LORD, and serve him only." This time they listen. They get rid of their idols, gather at Mizpah, fast, confess their sin, and Samuel prays for them.

The Philistines hear Israel is gathered and attack. The Israelites are terrified and beg Samuel to keep praying. He offers a sacrifice and cries out to God, and God thunders with a loud voice against the Philistines, throwing them into confusion. Israel wins.

Then Samuel does something simple. "Then Samuel took a stone and set it between Mizpah and Shen, and called its name Ebenezer, saying, 'The LORD helped us until now.'" Ebenezer means stone of help. If you've ever sung the old hymn Come Thou Fount and wondered what it means to raise your Ebenezer, this is it. It's a marker that says, God brought me this far.

KEY VERSE

Then Samuel took a stone and set it between Mizpah and Shen, and called its name Ebenezer, saying, "The LORD helped us until now."

1 Samuel 7:12 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the Israelites brought the ark into battle instead of asking God what to do?
2. In what ways do people today treat God like a good-luck charm?
3. What does the story of Dagon falling say about God, even when it looks like He's lost?
4. What would be an Ebenezer in your life, a moment you can look back on and say God helped you?

TRY THIS *Write down three times God has helped you, and keep the list somewhere you'll see it. That's your Ebenezer.*

CHAPTER 4

A King Like All the Nations

1 Samuel 8–12

Years pass, and Samuel gets old. He appoints his sons, Joel and Abijah, as judges. And history repeats itself. Just like Eli's sons, Samuel's sons are corrupt. They take bribes and twist justice. Samuel was a great prophet, but it seems he wasn't any better than Eli at passing his faith on to his kids.

So the elders of Israel come to Samuel at his home in Ramah with a demand. "Behold, you are old, and your sons don't walk in your ways. Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations."

On the surface, that sounds reasonable. Samuel's sons really were a problem. Israel really did need stable leadership. And Deuteronomy had even said that someday Israel might ask for a king. But listen to the last part of their request: like all the nations. Israel was supposed to be different from all the nations. They were God's people, and He was their King. Now they want to fit in.

Samuel is upset. He takes it personally. But when he prays about it, God says something that puts it in perspective: "they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me as the king over them." This isn't really about Samuel. It's about God. The people want a king they can see, a king who looks impressive, a king who will march

out in front of the army, more than they want to trust the invisible King who has rescued them again and again.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Was Having a King Wrong?**
>
> This is a question scholars and Christians discuss. Deuteronomy 17 anticipated it: "When you have come to the land which the LORD your God gives you, and possess it and dwell in it, and say, 'I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me,'" then Israel should set over themselves a king "whom the LORD your God chooses." The same passage warned that the king shouldn't pile up horses, wives, or money, and should read God's law every day. So the idea of a king wasn't automatically wrong. Many readers think the problem in 1 Samuel 8 was the people's motive: they wanted a king to replace their trust in God instead of a king who would lead them in trusting God. Others think the book has mixed feelings about kingship as a whole. Either way, God doesn't abandon His people when they make this choice. He works through it, and eventually He will give them a king after His own heart.

God tells Samuel to give the people what they want, but to warn them first. So Samuel describes what a king will actually do. "He will take your sons and appoint them as his servants, for his chariots and to be his horsemen." He'll take your daughters to cook and bake for him. He'll take your best fields and vineyards. He'll take a tenth of your harvest and your flocks. He'll take your servants and your donkeys. Notice the word take, over and over. And one day, Samuel says, you'll cry out because of the king you chose, and God won't answer you.

The people don't care. "No, but we will have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles." There it is again. Like all the nations.

REAL TALK **Wanting to Be Like Everyone Else**

Israel wanted a king because everyone else had one. That pull to fit in is incredibly strong, especially when you're a teenager. Everyone else has a phone, goes to that party, watches that show, dates, swears, vapes, or posts that kind of picture. And being different can feel lonely. But God never called His people to blend in. He called them to be different in the best way: kinder, more honest, more faithful, more free. That doesn't mean everything popular is bad. It means asking, before I do this, am I doing it because it's right, or just because everyone else is? And what am I giving up to fit in?

Now meet Saul. Chapter 9 introduces him like a movie star. He's the son of a wealthy man from the tribe of Benjamin, "an impressive young man; and there was not among the children of Israel a more handsome person than he. From his shoulders and upward he was taller than any of the people." If Israel wanted a king who looked like a king, here he is.

But the way Saul meets Samuel is almost comical. His father's donkeys have wandered off, and Saul and a servant spend days searching for them without any luck. Saul is ready to give up, but the servant suggests asking the local prophet. So the future king of Israel ends up at Samuel's door because he lost some donkeys.

God had already told Samuel that the man He chose would show up. Samuel invites Saul to a special meal, gives him the best portion, and hints at what's coming. Saul is confused. "Am I not a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel? And my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin?" At this point, Saul is humble. He doesn't think he's anything special.

The next morning, Samuel takes Saul aside and anoints him privately, pouring oil on his head. "Hasn't the LORD anointed you to be prince over his inheritance?" Samuel gives him three signs that

will happen on his way home, and they all come true. God's Spirit comes on Saul, and he prophesies with a group of prophets. The writer says God "gave him another heart." Saul's start is full of promise.

Then Samuel gathers the whole nation at Mizpah to choose the king publicly by casting lots, a way of asking God to make the choice. The lot falls to the tribe of Benjamin, then to Saul's family, then to Saul himself. But when they call his name, nobody can find him. They have to ask God where he is, and the LORD answers, "Behold, he has hidden himself among the baggage." The tallest man in Israel is hiding behind the suitcases.

Some readers see that as humility. Others see it as fear, or a lack of confidence that will cause problems later. Either way, it's hard not to feel for him. When they drag him out, he stands head and shoulders above everyone, and Samuel announces, "Do you see him whom the LORD has chosen, that there is no one like him among all the people?" The people shout, "Long live the king!"

Not everyone is impressed. "But certain worthless fellows said, 'How could this man save us?'" Saul doesn't fight back. "But he held his peace." So far, so good.

Saul's first real test comes quickly. The Ammonites surround the Israelite town of Jabesh Gilead and threaten to gouge out the right eye of every man there. When Saul hears about it, he's out in the field plowing with his oxen. "God's Spirit came mightily on Saul when he heard those words, and his anger burned hot." He rallies the tribes, leads a surprise attack at dawn, and rescues the city. The people are so excited that some want to kill the men who doubted Saul, but Saul refuses. "No man shall be put to death today; for

today the LORD has rescued Israel." It's Saul at his best: brave, generous, and giving God the credit.

Remember Jabesh Gilead. It will show up again at the very end of the book.

> **REAL TALK** **A Great Start Isn't Enough**
>
> Saul's early days are honestly impressive. He's humble. He's brave. He's filled with God's Spirit. He shows mercy to his critics. If the story ended in chapter 11, he'd be a hero. But a great start doesn't guarantee a great finish. Plenty of people start strong in faith, sports, school, or relationships and then drift. What matters is not just how you begin, but whether you keep following God when the pressure is on and nobody is cheering. Watch what happens to Saul in the next chapters. It's a warning for all of us.

In chapter 12, Samuel gives a farewell speech. He's not retiring from being a prophet, but he's handing over leadership to the king. He asks the people to testify whether he ever cheated or oppressed anyone, and they say no. Then he reminds them of everything God has done, from Egypt to the judges, and confronts them: asking for a king was a sin. To prove it, he prays, and God sends thunder and rain during the wheat harvest, when rain almost never fell.

The people are terrified and ask Samuel to pray for them. And Samuel gives them one of the most gracious answers in the book. Yes, you did wrong. But don't turn away from the LORD now. Serve Him with all your heart. "For the LORD will not forsake his people for his great name's sake, because it has pleased the LORD to make you a people for himself." And Samuel adds a promise of his own: "far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you." Even when people reject him, Samuel won't stop praying for them.

That's a good picture of God's grace. Israel made a bad choice. God didn't abandon them. He worked with them right where they were.

KEY VERSE

Only fear the LORD, and serve him in truth with all your heart; for consider what great things he has done for you.

1 Samuel 12:24 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Israel wanted a king "like all the nations"? Was their reason good or bad?
2. In what areas of your life do you feel the most pressure to be like everyone else?
3. Saul hid among the baggage. Was that humility, fear, or something else? Why do you think so?
4. Samuel said he would never stop praying for the people, even after they rejected him. Who is someone you could keep praying for?

TRY THIS *Name one way you've been trying to fit in that isn't good for you. Ask God for the courage to be different in that area this week.*

CHAPTER 5

Saul's Downfall

1 Samuel 13–15

Saul has been king for a while, and the Philistines are gathering for war, with chariots, horsemen, and soldiers "as the sand which is on the seashore." Saul's army is small, and many of his men are so terrified they hide in caves, holes, and rocks or run across the Jordan River.

Samuel had told Saul to wait for him at Gilgal for seven days. Samuel would come and offer a sacrifice and give Saul God's instructions before the battle. So Saul waits. "He stayed seven days, according to the time set by Samuel; but Samuel didn't come to Gilgal, and the people were scattering from him."

Put yourself in Saul's place. The enemy is massing. Your soldiers are leaving every hour. The prophet is late. So Saul takes matters into his own hands. "Bring the burnt offering to me here, and the peace offerings." He offers the sacrifice himself.

And just as he finishes, Samuel shows up. "What have you done?"

Saul's answer is a list of excuses. The people were scattering. You were late. The Philistines were gathering. "I forced myself therefore, and offered the burnt offering." It sounds almost noble, like he didn't want to do it but had no choice.

Samuel isn't buying it. "You have done foolishly. You have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God." If Saul had obeyed, God would have established his kingdom forever. "But now your kingdom will not continue. The LORD has sought for himself a man after his own heart."

> **REAL TALK** **Was That Really So Bad?**
>
> At first, Saul's punishment can seem harsh. He waited seven days. He offered a sacrifice to God, not to an idol. Why is that such a big deal? A few things are going on. First, Saul wasn't a priest, and he knew that offering the sacrifice wasn't his job. Second, God had given a clear instruction through His prophet, and Saul decided his own judgment was better. Third, and maybe most important, Saul was using the sacrifice like a tool, something he had to do to get God on his side before the battle, instead of trusting God to come through. The issue wasn't just a broken rule. It was a heart that panicked and grabbed control. Impatience often reveals what we really trust.

Meanwhile, Saul's son Jonathan is a completely different kind of person. While the army sits frozen, Jonathan and his armor bearer sneak toward a Philistine outpost on a cliff. Jonathan's reasoning is pure faith: "It may be that the LORD will work for us, for there is no restraint on the LORD to save by many or by few." Two men against a garrison. God sends an earthquake, the Philistines panic, and Israel wins a huge victory.

But Saul nearly ruins it. He had made his soldiers swear not to eat anything until evening, so they're exhausted and starving. Jonathan, who didn't hear the oath, eats some honey. When Saul finds out, he's ready to execute his own son, until the army refuses to let him. The soldiers save Jonathan's life. It's a pattern: Saul making rash, religious-sounding decisions that hurt the people around him.

Think about how different father and son are. Saul sits under a pomegranate tree with six hundred soldiers, waiting. Jonathan climbs a cliff with one friend and trusts God to show up. Saul makes a foolish vow that hurts his own army. Jonathan acts in faith and rescues it. It's almost as if the writer wants you to see what kind of king Jonathan might have been, and to feel the sadness of what's coming. Jonathan will turn out to be one of the most faithful and selfless people in the whole book, and he'll never wear the crown.

Then comes Saul's second big test. Samuel brings him a command from God: go and destroy the Amalekites completely. God says, "I remember what Amalek did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way when he came up out of Egypt." Saul is to "utterly destroy all that they have," people and animals alike.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Hard Command About Amalek**

This is one of the most troubling commands in the Bible, and it's okay to say so. The word for utterly destroy is the Hebrew herem, the same idea we saw in Deuteronomy and Joshua, where certain cities, like Jericho, were to be "devoted" to the LORD and completely destroyed. The Amalekites had attacked Israel right after the exodus, targeting the weakest people at the back: "all who were feeble behind you, when you were faint and weary." Exodus and Deuteronomy record God's promise that He would one day judge Amalek for it. Christians have understood this in several ways. Some see it as God's unique judgment on a people with a long history of brutal violence, carried out at one moment in history and never to be repeated. Some point out that ancient war reports often used sweeping, exaggerated language, and that Amalekites still appear later in 1 Samuel, suggesting the words weren't meant to be read with modern literalness. Others admit they don't fully understand it, and trust that God, who is perfectly just and merciful, sees what we can't, while noting that the New Testament calls Christians to love their enemies. All agree on this: these commands were tied to a specific time

> and place, and they never give anyone permission to commit violence in God's name today.

Saul attacks the Amalekites and wins. But "Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, of the cattle, of the fat calves, of the lambs, and all that was good." They destroy everything that's worthless and keep everything that's valuable. Saul obeys exactly as far as it's convenient for him.

God tells Samuel, "It grieves me that I have set up Saul to be king, for he has turned back from following me." Samuel is so upset that he cries out to the LORD all night.

The next morning, Samuel finds out that Saul has gone to Carmel to set up a monument in his own honor. When Samuel finally catches up with him, Saul greets him cheerfully. "You are blessed by the LORD! I have performed the commandment of the LORD."

Samuel's reply is one of the best comebacks in the Bible. "Then what does this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the cattle which I hear mean?"

Busted. And still Saul makes excuses. The soldiers did it. They saved the best animals to sacrifice to the LORD your God. Notice: your God. And notice that he blames the people again.

Samuel's answer is the heart of the whole section. "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the LORD's voice? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams." God doesn't want religious performances from people who won't listen to Him. He wants hearts that obey. Hosea and Jesus would later say the same thing: "For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice."

Then Samuel delivers the verdict. "Because you have rejected the LORD's word, he has also rejected you from being king."

Now Saul says, "I have sinned." But watch what he asks for next. He begs Samuel to come with him and honor him in front of the elders and the people. Even his confession is about his image. When Samuel turns to leave, Saul grabs the edge of his robe, and it tears. Samuel says the LORD has torn the kingdom from Saul today and given it to someone better.

> **REAL TALK** **Partial Obedience and Excuses**
>
> Saul's story is a case study in how not to respond when you've done wrong. He obeyed partway and called it obedience. He blamed other people. He used religious language to cover selfish choices. And when he finally admitted it, he was more worried about his reputation than about God. Compare that with someone who simply says: I was wrong. No excuses. I'm sorry. That's harder, but it's the way back. If you notice yourself saying "but" a lot after you've messed up, that might be a sign you're explaining instead of owning it. God isn't looking for perfect people. He's looking for honest ones.

Notice the difference between Saul's response and the response of another king we'll meet in 2 Samuel. When David later commits a terrible sin and the prophet Nathan confronts him, David doesn't blame anyone else or ask to keep up appearances. He simply says he has sinned against the LORD, and he writes Psalm 51, one of the most honest prayers of repentance ever written. Both kings sinned. Both were confronted by a prophet. Both said the words I have sinned. But one was sorry he got caught and worried about his image, and the other was broken over what he had done to God. That's the difference between regret and real repentance.

The chapter ends with deep sadness. "Samuel came no more to see Saul until the day of his death, but Samuel mourned for Saul. The

LORD grieved that he had made Saul king over Israel." Even in judgment, there's grief. God takes no pleasure in Saul's fall.

KEY VERSE

Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the LORD's voice? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.

1 Samuel 15:22 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Saul offered the sacrifice because he was afraid and impatient. When does impatience push you to make bad choices?
2. Compare Jonathan's faith in chapter 14 with Saul's fear in chapter 13. What made the difference?
3. What does "to obey is better than sacrifice" look like in your life? Are there ways you do religious things without really listening to God?
4. Saul kept making excuses. Why is it so hard to just say you were wrong?

TRY THIS *The next time you mess up this week, practice owning it with no excuses: I was wrong, and I'm sorry. See what happens.*

CHAPTER 6

The Shepherd Boy

1 Samuel 16

God doesn't let Samuel stay sad forever. "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go. I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided a king for myself among his sons."

Bethlehem. If you read the book of Ruth, you know this town. Jesse is the grandson of Boaz and Ruth the Moabitess.

Samuel is afraid. If Saul hears that he's anointing a new king, Saul will kill him. So God tells him to take a heifer and say he's come to offer a sacrifice, which is true. When Samuel arrives, the elders of Bethlehem come out trembling, wondering what they've done wrong. Samuel reassures them and invites Jesse and his sons to the sacrifice.

Then comes a kind of royal audition. Jesse's oldest son, Eliab, walks in, and Samuel is immediately impressed. Surely this is the one! Eliab must have been tall and good-looking, the kind of guy who looked like a king. Samuel is making the same mistake Israel made with Saul.

And God stops him. "But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Don't look on his face, or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for

I don't see as man sees. For man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.'"

That's one of the most important sentences in the Bible, and it's especially important if you live in a world of filters, followers, and first impressions. People judge by looks, height, clothes, popularity, talent, and how many likes you get. God doesn't. He looks at the heart: what you love, what you trust, who you are when nobody's watching.

> **REAL TALK** **God Looks at the Heart**
>
> It's hard to overstate how much pressure there is to look a certain way. Social media makes it worse. You can spend hours comparing yourself to edited pictures of people who don't even look like that in real life. 1 Samuel 16:7 is God's answer to all of it. He isn't impressed by the things that impress people, and He isn't unimpressed by the things people overlook. That doesn't mean your body doesn't matter; God made it and cares about it. But your worth doesn't come from how you look. And it cuts both ways. If God looks at the heart, then I should stop judging other people by how they look too. If you're struggling with how you see yourself, or with eating, or with anxiety about your looks, please talk to a parent, a counselor, or a doctor. You don't have to fight that alone.

So Jesse brings out his second son, Abinadab. No. Then Shammah. No. Seven sons walk past Samuel, and God says no to every one. Samuel is puzzled. "Are all your children here?"

Jesse's answer is almost an afterthought. "There remains yet the youngest. Behold, he is keeping the sheep." Jesse didn't even bother to invite him. The youngest son, the one who smells like sheep, isn't even considered. In that culture, the youngest child had the lowest status in the family.

Samuel insists. "Send and get him, for we will not sit down until he comes here." The whole party waits for the kid nobody thought of.

When David walks in, the writer tells us he was "ruddy, with a handsome face and good appearance." Ruddy probably means he had a reddish, healthy complexion, maybe red hair. So he wasn't unattractive. But he was young and small compared with his brothers, and nobody expected him. "The LORD said, 'Arise! Anoint him, for this is he.'"

Samuel pours the oil on David's head in front of his brothers. "Then the LORD's Spirit came mightily on David from that day forward." And then Samuel simply goes home. No crown. No palace. No announcement. David goes back to the sheep.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Anointed**
>
> Anointing meant pouring oil on someone's head, usually olive oil mixed with spices. It was a sign that God had chosen and set apart that person for a special role. Priests were anointed, and so were kings. The Hebrew word for an anointed person is mashiach, which is where we get Messiah. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, that word became christos, which is where we get Christ. So when the New Testament calls Jesus the Christ, it's saying He is the Anointed One, the ultimate King that David's anointing pointed toward. In 1 Samuel, David is anointed years before he actually becomes king. He'll spend a long time waiting, hiding, and trusting God before the promise comes true.

Meanwhile, back at the palace, something is wrong with Saul. "Now the LORD's Spirit departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD troubled him." The word troubled can also mean terrified or tormented. Saul is struggling with what sounds like terrible fear, anger, and dark moods.

BACKGROUND CHECK **An Evil Spirit from the LORD?**

This phrase surprises a lot of readers. Did God send something evil to Saul? Christians read it in a few ways. Some understand it as an actual evil spirit that God allowed to torment Saul after Saul rejected Him, much as God allowed Satan to test Job. Others note that the Hebrew word for evil can also mean harmful or distressing, and read it as a troubling spirit, a deep inner torment, that God permitted as a consequence of Saul's choices. Still others see a description, in ancient language, of something like severe depression, anxiety, or paranoia, which the writer understood as being under God's control. All these views agree that the Bible teaches God is sovereign even over evil, and that He is never the author of sin. What's clear is that Saul was suffering, and his suffering got worse when he refused to turn back to God.

Saul's servants have an idea. Music might help. They suggest finding someone who can play the harp, which was probably more like a small lyre. One of them knows just the guy: "a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skillful in playing, a mighty man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a handsome person; and the LORD is with him."

So the shepherd boy who has just been secretly anointed as the next king is brought into the palace to play music for the current king. The irony is thick. Saul likes David so much that he makes him his armor bearer. And "When the spirit from God was on Saul, David took the harp and played with his hand; so Saul was refreshed and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him."

SAFETY NOTE **When the Darkness Won't Lift**

Whatever was happening inside Saul, it was real, and it was painful. Many people today know what it's like to feel trapped in dark moods, anxiety, anger, or despair. If that's you, you're not weak, and you're not alone. Music, like David's harp, can genuinely help; so can rest, exercise, time outdoors, and good friends. But sometimes those things aren't enough, and that's okay.

> Depression and anxiety are real conditions, and getting help from a doctor or counselor is a wise, brave step, not a lack of faith. Please talk to a parent or another trusted adult about how you're feeling. And if you ever have thoughts of hurting yourself or that life isn't worth living, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time in the United States. Help is real, and things can get better.

David probably wrote some of his first songs during these years. Many of the psalms are attributed to him, including the most famous one: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall lack nothing." The boy who learned to care for sheep and to sing to God in the fields is being prepared, quietly, to shepherd a nation.

KEY VERSE

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Don't look on his face, or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for I don't see as man sees. For man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

1 Samuel 16:7 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think even Samuel, a great prophet, was impressed by Eliab's appearance?
2. What are the main ways people judge each other by outward appearance at your school?
3. David was anointed and then went back to watching sheep. What do you think he learned in the waiting?
4. Saul found some relief through music. What helps you when you're struggling? Who could you talk to when it isn't enough?

TRY THIS *This week, make a point of noticing and encouraging someone who is usually overlooked, the way Samuel waited for David.*

CHAPTER 7

David and Goliath

1 Samuel 17

It's probably the most famous fight in history. Even people who have never opened a Bible know what a David-and-Goliath story is. But the real story is better, and stranger, than the version on motivational posters.

The Philistines and Israel are camped on two hills facing each other, with the Valley of Elah in between. Every day, a champion walks out from the Philistine camp, "named Goliath of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span." He wears a bronze helmet and a coat of armor that weighs about 125 pounds. His spear has an iron point that weighs about 15 pounds. A shield bearer walks in front of him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Tall Was Goliath?**

A cubit was about eighteen inches, the length from your elbow to your fingertip, and a span was about nine inches. So six cubits and a span is roughly nine feet nine inches. That's the reading of the Masoretic Text, the standard Hebrew text most English Bibles follow. But some ancient manuscripts say something different. The oldest Hebrew copy of this passage, found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation, both say four cubits and a span, about six feet nine inches. The first-century historian Josephus agrees with four. Scholars debate which reading is original; some think a copyist's eye slipped to the number six elsewhere in the passage, while others defend the Masoretic number. Here's the thing: even at six foot nine, in an age when the average man was probably

> around five foot three, Goliath would have been a giant, a professional killer in heavy armor. Either way, the point of the story doesn't change.

Goliath shouts a challenge across the valley. Why line up a whole army? Send one man to fight me. If he wins, we'll be your servants. If I win, you'll be ours. He mocks Israel's army and dares them to fight. "When Saul and all Israel heard those words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid." And Goliath does this every morning and every evening, for forty days.

Remember that Saul was the tallest man in Israel. If anyone should have gone out to face the giant, it was the king who was head and shoulders above everyone. The people had asked for a king to go out before them and fight their battles. Now their king is hiding in his tent.

Then David shows up. He isn't there to fight. His three oldest brothers are in Saul's army, and his father sends him with food for them and some cheese for their commander. Basically, David is the delivery boy.

He arrives just as Goliath steps out to shout his challenge. David watches the Israelite soldiers run away in fear. And he's not scared. He's offended. "For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?"

That's the key to the whole story. Everyone else is looking at Goliath and seeing how big he is. David is looking at God and seeing how big He is. Goliath isn't just insulting Israel's army. He's insulting Israel's God.

His oldest brother, Eliab, hears him and gets angry. "Why have you come down? With whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your pride and the evil of your heart." If you

have older siblings, you might recognize the tone. Remember that Eliab is the one Samuel thought should be king. Maybe he's jealous. Maybe he's embarrassed that his little brother has more courage than he does. David answers the way younger siblings have answered for all of history: What did I do now? Can't I even talk?

Word gets back to Saul, and David is brought to him. "Let no man's heart fail because of him. Your servant will go and fight with this Philistine."

Saul is not impressed. "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are but a youth, and he a man of war from his youth."

So David tells him about his job. When a lion or a bear came and grabbed a lamb from the flock, David went after it, rescued the lamb, and when the animal turned on him, grabbed it by its beard and killed it. "Your servant struck both the lion and the bear. This uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God."

And then he gives God the credit: "The LORD, who delivered me out of the paw of the lion and out of the paw of the bear, will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine."

David's confidence isn't in himself. It's in God's track record. He's done this before, not because he's tough, but because God was with him. Saul, out of options, says, "Go! The LORD will be with you."

Saul tries to dress David in his own armor: bronze helmet, coat of mail, and sword. David tries walking around in it and can barely move. It doesn't fit, and he's never trained with it. So he takes it all off. That's a picture of something bigger. David can't fight Saul's

way. He has to fight God's way, with what God has already given him.

"He took his staff in his hand, and chose for himself five smooth stones out of the brook, and put them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag which he had. His sling was in his hand; and he came near to the Philistine."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Just a Little Sling?**

In pictures, David's sling often looks like a toy. It wasn't. A shepherd's sling was a long strip of leather or woven cloth with a pouch in the middle. Spinning it and releasing one end could launch a smooth stone the size of an egg at around a hundred miles an hour, with deadly accuracy. Armies had whole units of slingers; Judges 20 mentions seven hundred left-handed slingers from Benjamin who could hit a hair without missing. So David wasn't helpless. But he was a teenage shepherd with a ranged weapon facing a trained, armored warrior, and he had never fought a battle. Humanly speaking, he should have lost.

When Goliath sees who's coming, he's insulted. "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" He curses David by his gods and threatens to feed his body to the birds and animals.

David's answer is one of the great speeches of the Bible. "You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin; but I come to you in the name of the LORD of Armies, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied." He says that God will hand Goliath over to him that day, so that all the earth may know there is a God in Israel, and so that everyone gathered there will know "that the LORD doesn't save with sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's."

The battle is the LORD's. That's the point.

Then it all happens fast. Goliath moves in. David runs toward him, not away. He reaches into his bag, takes out a stone, slings it, and it

strikes Goliath in the forehead. "The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the earth." Remember Dagon falling on his face before the ark? Now Goliath, the champion of the Philistines, falls on his face before the servant of the LORD.

"So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone, and struck the Philistine and killed him; but there was no sword in David's hand." David finishes the fight with Goliath's own sword. When the Philistines see their champion is dead, they run, and Israel chases them all the way back to their cities.

> **REAL TALK** **It's Not Mainly About Your Giants**
>
> You've probably heard sermons about facing the giants in your life: fear, a hard class, an addiction, a bully. There's some truth there. God does help us face hard things, and David's courage is worth copying. But if that's all you take away, you miss the main point. In this story, you're probably not David. You're more like the terrified Israelite soldiers, unable to win on your own. David is the one who steps forward to fight on behalf of his people, and his victory becomes their victory. Christians see this as a preview of Jesus, the Son of David, who faced our biggest enemies, sin and death, alone, and won the battle for us. So the first lesson of 1 Samuel 17 isn't be brave like David. It's that God is faithful, and the battle belongs to Him. Courage comes from trusting that.

It's also worth noticing what happens to the rest of the army. As long as Goliath was standing, the soldiers of Israel were frozen with fear. They had the same weapons and the same training after the giant fell as they had before. What changed was that someone had won the battle for them. Once Goliath was down, they found their courage, chased the Philistines, and shared in the victory. That's a picture of how the New Testament describes what Jesus has done. Christians don't find courage by pretending to be strong enough on

their own. They find it by trusting that the decisive battle has already been won, and then following their King into the fight.

One more thing. David didn't go out to fight because he wanted to be famous. He went because Goliath was insulting God and terrifying God's people. Courage that comes from caring about God's name and about other people is very different from courage that's really about proving yourself. The first kind lasts. The second kind usually runs out the moment nobody is watching.

After the battle, Saul asks his general, Abner, whose son this young man is. That's a little strange, since David had already been playing music for Saul. Scholars offer several explanations. Saul may have known David as a musician but not known his family, which mattered because he had promised to reward the giant-killer's family. Or the book may be weaving together different accounts of how David came to Saul's court. Either way, David stands before the king holding Goliath's head and introduces himself simply: I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite.

A shepherd from Bethlehem has done what the tallest king in Israel wouldn't. Nobody will forget it, least of all Saul.

KEY VERSE

David said, "The LORD, who delivered me out of the paw of the lion and out of the paw of the bear, will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine." Saul said to David, "Go! The LORD will be with you."

1 Samuel 17:37 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Everyone else saw how big Goliath was. David saw how big God was. What's the difference in how they responded?
2. David's confidence came from what God had done for him before. What has God done in your life that could give you courage now?
3. Why do you think David refused to wear Saul's armor? Are there ways you try to be someone you're not?
4. How does seeing Jesus as the one who fights for us change the way you read this story?

TRY THIS *Think of something you're afraid of right now. Write down one way God has been faithful to you before, and pray about your fear with that in mind.*

CHAPTER 8

Friends and Enemies

1 Samuel 18–23

Right after the battle, something beautiful happens. “When he had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.”

Jonathan is Saul’s oldest son, the crown prince, the one who should be the next king. He’s also a hero in his own right, the one who climbed a cliff and attacked a Philistine outpost with only his armor bearer. If anyone had reason to see David as a threat, it was Jonathan. Instead, he becomes David’s best friend.

“Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul.” A covenant was a serious, binding promise of loyalty. And Jonathan seals it with an incredible gift: he gives David his own robe, his armor, his sword, his bow, and his belt. In that culture, the prince’s robe and weapons were symbols of his position. Jonathan is basically handing David his future. He seems to understand, before almost anyone else, that God has chosen David to be king, and he’s okay with it.

> REAL TALK **What Makes a Real Friend?**
>
> David and Jonathan’s friendship is one of the great friendships in all of literature. Jonathan was loyal when it cost him. He protected David from his own father. He was happy for David’s success instead of jealous of it. And he kept pointing David to God. Some modern readers have suggested their

relationship was romantic; most scholars and Christian traditions read it as a deep covenant friendship, described in the language of loyalty that ancient people used for allies and brothers. Either way, it shows what real friendship can look like. Ask yourself: Do my friends make me better or worse? Do they celebrate when I win, or compete with me? Do they point me toward God? And what kind of friend am I to them? Everybody needs a Jonathan, and everybody can be one.

Saul, on the other hand, is about to become David's worst enemy. David keeps succeeding at everything Saul sends him to do. When the army comes home from battle, women come out of the towns dancing and singing. "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands."

That song lands like a punch. "Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him." He does the math. They've given David ten thousands and me only thousands. "What can he have more but the kingdom?" And then one of the most chilling sentences in the book: "Saul watched David from that day and forward." Jealousy has gotten into Saul's heart, and it's going to eat him alive.

REAL TALK **The Poison of Jealousy**

Saul had everything: a throne, a palace, an army, and a son like Jonathan. But one song about someone else being better made him miserable. That's what jealousy does. It takes your eyes off everything you've been given and fixes them on what someone else has. Social media can feed it constantly: their grades, their friends, their relationship, their body, their followers. The cure isn't pretending you don't feel it. It's naming it, talking to God about it, and practicing gratitude for what He's given you. One of the best ways to fight jealousy is to do what Jonathan did: celebrate the other person's success out loud. It's hard. It's also freeing.

The next day, the dark mood comes on Saul again. David is playing the harp, as usual, and Saul has a spear in his hand. He throws it, trying to pin David to the wall. David dodges it. Twice.

From then on, Saul keeps trying to get rid of David. He makes him a commander and sends him into dangerous battles, hoping the Philistines will kill him. It backfires. "David behaved himself wisely in all his ways; and the LORD was with him." The more Saul tries to bring David down, the more everyone loves him. "Saul was afraid of David, because the LORD was with him, and had departed from Saul."

Saul offers David his daughter Michal in marriage, but asks for a bride price of a hundred dead Philistines, hoping David will die trying. David brings back two hundred. Michal genuinely loves David, which makes Saul even more afraid.

Eventually Saul stops pretending. He orders Jonathan and his servants to kill David. Jonathan talks his father out of it for a while, but the spear comes out again. "Saul sought to pin David to the wall with the spear, but he slipped away out of Saul's presence." Then Saul sends men to David's house to kill him in the morning, and Michal helps David escape through a window. She puts a household idol in the bed, covered with goat's hair, to buy him time.

David runs to Jonathan, desperate. "There is but a step between me and death," he says. Jonathan can hardly believe his father would really kill David, so they make a plan. David will skip the king's feast, and Jonathan will see how Saul reacts. Then Jonathan will go out to the field and shoot arrows, and the words he shouts to his servant boy will tell David whether it's safe.

At the feast, Saul explodes. He curses Jonathan and insults his mother. As long as David lives, he says, you'll never be king. Bring him here, because he must die. When Jonathan asks why, Saul throws his spear at his own son.

> **SAFETY NOTE** **When a Parent's Anger Turns Dangerous**
>
> Saul's anger at Jonathan went from cruel words to an attempt to hurt him. If someone in your home screams at you, insults you, threatens you, or hurts you, that is not okay, and it is not your fault. You don't have to handle it alone or keep it secret to protect them. Tell a trusted adult, like a relative, a teacher, a school counselor, a coach, or a pastor. In the United States, you can call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453, any time. If you are in danger right now, call 911. Jonathan honored his father but refused to go along with his violence. You can love someone and still get help.

The next morning, Jonathan goes to the field and shoots the arrows. The signal is clear: run. After the servant boy leaves, the two friends meet one last time. They kiss each other and cry, "and David wept the most." Jonathan says, "Go in peace, because we have both sworn in the LORD's name." Their promise will reach even to their children.

Jonathan's choice is worth thinking about. He could have sided with his father. It would have been easier, safer, and better for his own future. Instead, he chose what was right, even though it cost him the throne and put him in danger. But he also didn't abandon his father. He kept serving Saul and, in the end, fought and died beside him. Loyalty to God and loyalty to family sometimes pull in different directions, and Jonathan found a way to honor both without going along with evil. That's a hard balance, and if you're living with a parent or relative who is making bad choices, you may know exactly how hard it is. You don't have to figure it out alone. Talk with an adult you trust.

From here on, David is a fugitive. He's hungry, alone, and terrified. He goes to the priests at Nob, who give him holy bread and Goliath's sword. He runs to the Philistine city of Gath, of all places, and when they recognize him, he pretends to be insane, scribbling on the doors and drooling on his beard, to escape. Many of David's psalms, full of fear, tears, and trust, come from this time.

Notice that even when David was desperate, he never stopped praying. The titles of several psalms connect them to these years on the run. Psalm 34, for example, is linked to the day he pretended to be insane at Gath, and it says that the LORD is near to the brokenhearted. Psalm 57 and Psalm 142 are linked to his time hiding in a cave. They're full of fear and tears, but they keep coming back to trust. David didn't pretend to be fine. He told God exactly how scared he was, and then he chose to trust Him anyway.

Then David hides in a cave called Adullam. And people start showing up. "Everyone who was in distress, everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered themselves to him; and he became captain over them." About four hundred men. David's first army is a group of misfits, people in trouble, people in debt, and people with nothing left to lose. And David becomes their leader.

It's worth noticing what kind of leader David becomes in that cave. He doesn't recruit the strong and successful. He takes in people nobody else wants, and he turns them into the mighty men who will later be famous for their courage. Centuries later, Jesus would do something similar, gathering fishermen, tax collectors, and people with messy pasts and turning them into the leaders of His church. If you feel like you don't fit anywhere, or you've made a mess of things, that's exactly the kind of person God has always been willing

to work with. The cave of Adullam was a hiding place, but it became a training ground.

The darkest moment of these chapters comes when Saul learns that the priests at Nob helped David. In a rage, he orders the priests killed. When his own soldiers refuse to lift a hand against the LORD's priests, a foreigner named Doeg carries out the massacre. Only one priest, Abiathar, escapes and runs to David. David is heartbroken, and blames himself. Saul, who once refused to destroy the Amalekites as God commanded, now destroys God's own priests. That's how far jealousy has taken him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Never Alone**
>
> Even on the run, David isn't left alone. Prophets and priests join him. Mighty men gather to him. And in chapter 23, when Saul is hunting David in the wilderness day after day, Jonathan finds a way to sneak out to see him. "Jonathan, Saul's son, arose and went to David into the woods, and strengthened his hand in God." Notice that Jonathan doesn't just cheer David up. He strengthens him in God. "Don't be afraid," he says. "You will be king over Israel, and I will be next to you." It's the last time they will ever see each other.

KEY VERSE

Jonathan, Saul's son, arose and went to David into the woods, and strengthened his hand in God.

1 Samuel 23:16 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Jonathan gave David his robe and weapons, symbols of his future as king. Why do you think he was willing to do that?
2. Saul's jealousy started with one song. What small things can stir up jealousy in your life, and how can you fight it?
3. What does it mean to strengthen someone's hand in God? Who has done that for you?
4. David's first followers were people in distress and debt. What does that tell you about the kind of people God welcomes?

TRY THIS *Text or tell a friend one specific thing you're thankful for about them, and one way you've seen God at work in their life.*

CHAPTER 9

Mercy and Wisdom

1 Samuel 24–27

Saul is hunting David in the wilderness near En Gedi, a rocky area full of caves near the Dead Sea, with three thousand of his best soldiers. Along the way, Saul needs a bathroom break. He goes into a cave "to relieve himself." And as it turns out, David and his men are hiding in the very back of that same cave.

You can imagine the whispered excitement. David's men nudge him. This is it! This is the day the LORD told you about! God has handed your enemy over to you. Do whatever you want with him.

David creeps forward in the dark and cuts off a corner of Saul's robe without him noticing. But as soon as he's back, "David's heart struck him because he had cut off Saul's skirt." Even that small act felt wrong. He tells his men, "The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD's anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, since he is the LORD's anointed." He refuses to let them attack.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The LORD's Anointed**

Why wouldn't David kill Saul? Saul was trying to murder him, after all, and God had already chosen David to be king. But David knew that Saul had also been anointed by God. Saul's position came from God, and David believed that only God had the right to remove him. David wasn't going to grab the throne by violence. He would wait for God to give it to him in God's way and God's time. That doesn't mean leaders can never be challenged or held

accountable; the prophets confronted kings all the time, and the Bible never tells anyone to stay in a dangerous situation. David himself ran away from Saul. But it does mean David refused to take revenge into his own hands.

After Saul leaves the cave, David steps out and calls after him. "My lord the king!" He bows to the ground and holds up the piece of the robe. Look. I could have killed you. "Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you." And then he says the thing that defines David in this part of the story: "May the LORD judge between me and you, and may the LORD avenge me of you; but my hand will not be on you."

For a moment, Saul seems to break. "Is that your voice, my son David?" He cries out loud. "You are more righteous than I; for you have done good to me, whereas I have done evil to you." He even admits that David will be king someday. It's a moving scene. But it doesn't last.

REAL TALK **Revenge**

When someone hurts you, revenge can feel like justice. It can even feel like God is handing you the opportunity, the way David's men said. Maybe it's posting something about the person, spreading what you know, turning their friends against them, or hitting back. David's answer was hard and right: let God judge. Paul says the same thing in the New Testament: "Don't seek revenge yourselves, beloved, but give place to God's wrath." That doesn't mean pretending what they did was okay, and it doesn't mean you have to stay close to someone who is hurting you. David kept his distance from Saul. It means refusing to become cruel yourself. If someone is harming you, tell a trusted adult and let them help. Getting help isn't revenge. It's wisdom.

In chapter 25, we learn that Samuel has died. All Israel gathers to mourn him. The last great judge is gone. And right after that, David almost makes the worst mistake of his life so far.

There's a rich man named Nabal who has thousands of sheep and goats near the town of Carmel. "This woman was intelligent and had a beautiful face; but the man was surly and evil in his doings." That's how the writer introduces Nabal and his wife, Abigail. Nabal's name means fool, and he lives up to it.

David and his men have been protecting Nabal's shepherds out in the wilderness, guarding them from raiders. Now it's sheep-shearing time, a festival with lots of food, and David sends ten young men to politely ask Nabal for whatever he can spare.

Nabal insults them. "Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants who break away from their masters these days." In other words, David's just a runaway nobody. Nabal sends them away with nothing.

When David hears, he loses it. "Every man put on his sword!" He takes four hundred men and sets off to kill Nabal and every male in his household. The man who wouldn't kill Saul in the cave is about to murder a whole family over an insult. Even good people can snap.

One of Nabal's servants runs to Abigail and tells her everything. David's men were good to us, he says. They protected us day and night. Now disaster is coming, and "he is such a worthless fellow that one can't speak to him." Even Nabal's own servants know you can't reason with him.

Abigail doesn't waste a second. She quickly gathers two hundred loaves of bread, wine, five sheep ready to cook, grain, a hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs, loads it all on donkeys, and rides out to meet David. She doesn't tell her husband.

When she sees David coming down the mountain with four hundred angry, armed men, she gets off her donkey and bows to the ground. "On me, my lord, on me be the blame!" Then she gives one of the wisest speeches in the Bible.

She doesn't make excuses for Nabal. "As his name is, so is he. Nabal is his name, and folly is with him." She offers the gifts. And then she reminds David who he is. God is going to make you a lasting dynasty, she says, because you fight the LORD's battles. Someday, when you're king, you don't want this on your conscience: "that you have shed blood without cause, or that my lord has avenged himself."

She's not just stopping a massacre. She's protecting David from himself.

David hears it. "Blessed is the LORD, the God of Israel, who sent you today to meet me!" And then: "Blessed is your discretion, and blessed are you, who have kept me today from blood guiltiness, and from avenging myself with my own hand." He accepts her gifts and sends her home in peace.

REAL TALK **Be an Abigail**

Abigail was brave, quick, humble, and wise. She stepped into the middle of an explosive situation and calmed it down, not with weapons, but with words and generosity. She spoke truth to a powerful, angry man, respectfully but clearly. And David, to his credit, listened. Most of us will be both David and Abigail at different times. Sometimes you'll be the one so angry you're about to do something you'll regret, and you'll need someone to talk you down. Will you listen? And sometimes you'll be the one who sees a friend about to explode, about to send that text, throw that punch, or post that video, and you'll have the chance to step in. Proverbs says a gentle answer turns away wrath. A few wise words at the right moment can save a lot of pain. If a situation could turn violent, though, get an adult involved right away.

When Abigail gets home, Nabal is throwing a party like a king and is very drunk, so she waits until morning to tell him what happened. When he hears it, "his heart died within him," and he becomes like a stone. Many readers think he had a stroke or heart attack. About ten days later, the LORD strikes him and he dies. When David hears, he praises God for keeping him from evil, and asks Abigail to marry him. She agrees.

Some readers are uncomfortable with how this story ends, with David marrying Abigail right after her husband's death. It helps to remember that in that world, a widow with no protection was in real danger, and marriage to a powerful man was a way of providing safety for her and her household. The text doesn't present it as a romance so much as the honoring of a remarkable woman who had saved David from himself. The Bible also records that David married several women during these years, which, like the polygamy we saw in Hannah's family, will bring him serious trouble later. The Bible often tells us what happened without approving of everything that happened.

What's clear is that Abigail is one of the wisest people in the whole book. She saw what was coming, acted quickly, spoke humbly and honestly, and reminded a future king of his calling at the very moment he was about to forget it. In a book full of powerful men making terrible decisions, she stands out.

In chapter 26, David gets a second chance to kill Saul. Saul is hunting him again, and one night David and his nephew Abishai sneak into Saul's camp while everyone, even the guards, is in a deep sleep sent by the LORD. Saul's spear is stuck in the ground next to his head. Abishai whispers, let me pin him to the ground with one thrust. I won't need a second.

David says no again. “Don’t destroy him, for who can stretch out his hand against the LORD’s anointed, and be guiltless?” Instead, they take Saul’s spear and water jug and slip away. From a safe distance on the next hill, David calls out and mocks Saul’s general Abner for not protecting the king. Then he holds up the spear.

Saul again admits his sin. “I have sinned. Return, my son David; for I will no more do you harm.” He adds, “Behold, I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly.” Played the fool. That’s exactly what Saul has done. But David has learned that Saul’s words can’t be trusted. They part ways, and they never see each other again.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Running to the Enemy**
>
> By chapter 27, David is worn out. “I will now perish one day by the hand of Saul,” he says to himself. So he takes his six hundred men and their families and goes to live among the Philistines, working for Achish, the king of Gath. Achish gives him a town called Ziklag. David spends about a year and four months there, raiding Israel’s enemies while telling Achish he’s raiding Israel. It’s a strange, morally messy chapter. The Bible doesn’t hold David up as a perfect example here. It shows a tired, frightened man making his own plans to survive. Even heroes of faith have seasons when they’re running on empty.

KEY VERSE

Blessed is your discretion, and blessed are you, who have kept me today from blood guiltiness, and from avenging myself with my own hand.

1 Samuel 25:33 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. David's men said God had handed Saul over to him. How can people use God's name to justify what they already want to do?
2. Why do you think David refused to kill Saul but was ready to kill Nabal? What does that tell you about anger?
3. What made Abigail's words so effective? How could you use words like hers in a tense situation?
4. Have you ever been talked out of something you would have regretted? Who did it, and how?

TRY THIS *The next time you're really angry this week, wait before you act. Pray, take a walk, or talk to someone wise before you say or do anything.*

CHAPTER 10

Saul's Last Night

1 Samuel 28–31

The Philistines gather a huge army to attack Israel, and Saul is terrified. "When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly." The tall king who once rescued Jabesh Gilead now can't stop shaking.

He tries to ask God what to do. But "the LORD didn't answer him by dreams, by Urim, or by prophets." Samuel, the one person who always told Saul the truth, is dead. And God is silent.

So Saul does something desperate. Years earlier, he had obeyed God's law and driven the mediums and spiritists out of the land. Now he asks his servants to find one. "Seek for me a woman who has a familiar spirit, that I may go to her and inquire of her." His servants know just where to look: there's a medium at Endor.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Mediums Were Forbidden**
>
> God's law strictly forbade any attempt to contact the dead or get secret knowledge through spirits. Deuteronomy lists the forbidden practices: no one who "uses divination, one who tells fortunes, or an enchanter, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or someone who consults with a familiar spirit, or a wizard, or a necromancer." A necromancer is someone who tries to talk to the dead. The reason was simple. God's people were supposed to seek guidance from God alone. Today, Christians generally apply this to things like séances, Ouija boards, psychics, tarot cards, and spirit-contacting games. Some people treat

these as harmless fun. The Bible treats them as spiritually dangerous, because they open a door that God has told us to keep shut. If you've been involved in something like this and it's left you scared, talk to a pastor or another trusted Christian adult.

Saul disguises himself and goes to Endor at night with two of his men. He asks the woman to call up a spirit for him. She's suspicious. Doesn't he know what King Saul has done to people like her? Saul swears by the LORD, ironically, that she won't be punished. "Whom shall I bring up to you?" she asks. "Bring Samuel up for me."

What happens next surprises everyone, including the medium. "When the woman saw Samuel, she cried with a loud voice." She suddenly realizes who her customer is. "Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul!" Saul tells her not to be afraid and asks what she sees. "I see a god coming up out of the earth," she says, and describes an old man wrapped in a robe. Saul recognizes Samuel and bows to the ground.

The figure speaks: "Why have you disturbed me, to bring me up?" Saul pours out his fear. The Philistines are attacking. "God has departed from me, and answers me no more." The answer he gets is devastating. The LORD has torn the kingdom from you and given it to David, because you didn't obey Him about Amalek. Tomorrow Israel will fall to the Philistines, "and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me."

REAL TALK **Was It Really Samuel?**

Christians have debated this scene for centuries, and sincere believers land in different places. Many readers, ancient and modern, think it really was Samuel, sent by God, not summoned by the medium. They point out that the text calls him Samuel several times, that the woman seems shocked, as if this had never actually happened before, and that his message is a true prophecy

that comes to pass. A second view, held by some early church writers and by Reformers including Martin Luther and John Calvin, is that it was a demon or evil spirit impersonating Samuel, since God would not let a forbidden practice bring back a prophet. A third view suggests the medium was a fraud who used trickery and Saul's own fear, though that view struggles to explain her surprise and the accurate prophecy. All three views agree on the important things: Saul was wrong to go to a medium, the experience brought him no comfort, and the Bible's warning against contacting the dead still stands.

Saul collapses full length on the ground. He hasn't eaten all day or all night, and he's terrified. The medium and his servants beg him to eat something, and finally he does. Then he walks out into the dark toward his last battle.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Meanwhile, at Ziklag**

While Saul is at Endor, David is in his own crisis. The Philistine commanders don't trust him, so they send him home before the battle. When David and his men get back to Ziklag, they find it burned and their wives and children taken captive by Amalekite raiders. His men are so grief-stricken that they talk about stoning him. "But David strengthened himself in the LORD his God." He asks God what to do, pursues the raiders, rescues every person, and shares the plunder even with the men too exhausted to fight. Both Saul and David face terror and loss in these chapters. One runs to a medium. The other runs to God.

The battle happens on Mount Gilboa. "The men of Israel fled from before the Philistines, and fell down slain on Mount Gilboa." The Philistines close in on Saul and his sons. Jonathan is killed, along with two of his brothers. Saul is badly wounded by archers. Afraid of being captured and tortured by the Philistines, he asks his armor bearer to kill him. When the armor bearer refuses, terrified, Saul takes his own life. His armor bearer dies with him. "So Saul died

with his three sons, his armor bearer, and all his men that same day together."

It's one of the saddest endings in the Bible. The king who started with so much promise dies alone in defeat and despair. Jonathan, the loyal friend who never did anything to deserve it, dies beside his father.

> **SAFETY NOTE** **If You're Thinking About Suicide**
>
> Saul's story ends in despair, and it's okay to feel the weight of that. If you have ever thought about ending your life, please hear this: you matter, and your story is not over. The feelings that make suicide seem like the only way out are real, but they are not the truth about your future. They can change, and help is available. Please tell someone today: a parent, a counselor, a pastor, a doctor, or another trusted adult. In the United States, you can call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night, and someone will listen. If you are in immediate danger, call 911. And if you've lost someone to suicide, it is not your fault, and you don't have to carry that grief alone. God is near to the brokenhearted.

It's important to read this part of the story with compassion. Saul was badly wounded, surrounded, exhausted, and terrified. He had been carrying dark moods for years. He had lost the prophet who guided him. He felt that God had gone silent. None of that makes his choice right, and the Bible doesn't hold it up as an example. But the text doesn't mock him either. It tells the story with sadness. And it's worth remembering that Saul's despair grew over many years, as he kept choosing fear, jealousy, and isolation instead of turning back to God and letting others help him. One of the most important lessons of his life is that we were never meant to carry darkness alone.

When the Philistines find Saul's body, they treat it with contempt and hang it on the wall of the town of Beth Shan. But then

something happens that shows not everything about Saul's life was lost.

Remember Jabesh Gilead? It was the town Saul rescued in his very first battle, back in chapter 11, when he was still brave and humble and full of God's Spirit. "When the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men arose, went all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth Shan." They bring the bodies home, bury their bones under a tamarisk tree, and fast for seven days.

Decades later, they still remembered what Saul had done for them. They risked their lives to give him the dignity of a burial. It's a reminder that even a life that ends in tragedy is not only defined by its ending.

The book of 1 Chronicles gives a sober summary: "So Saul died for his trespass which he committed against the LORD." He didn't keep God's word, and he consulted a medium instead of seeking the LORD. But 2 Samuel opens with David's lament for both of them. David, who had every reason to hate Saul, writes a song that says, "Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives. In their death, they were not divided." He doesn't celebrate. He grieves.

1 Samuel began with Hannah's song about God lifting up the lowly and bringing down the proud. It ends with that song coming true. The proud king who wanted to be like all the nations has fallen. The shepherd boy, who has spent years running, hiding, and waiting, is about to become king. And God, who looks at the heart, has kept every one of His promises.

KEY VERSE

David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because the souls of all the people were grieved, every man for his sons and for his daughters; but David strengthened himself in the LORD his God.

1 Samuel 30:6 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. When God was silent, Saul went to a medium. What are some ways people today look for answers in the wrong places?
2. Which view of the Endor story do you find most convincing, and why?
3. Both Saul and David faced terror and loss in these chapters. What made the difference in how they responded?
4. The people of Jabesh Gilead remembered Saul's kindness for decades. Who has shown you kindness that you want to remember?

TRY THIS *Write down the 988 number in your phone, even if you don't need it, so you'll have it for yourself or a friend. Then tell one person this week how much they matter to you.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

1 Samuel begins with a barren woman singing that God lifts up the lowly, and it ends with a proud king dead on a mountain. In between, God sets aside the king who looked the part and chooses a shepherd boy from Bethlehem. The word for what Samuel did to David is anointed, pouring oil on his head. In Hebrew, the anointed one is mashiach, which gives us the word Messiah. In Greek, it's christos, which gives us the word Christ.

Jewish readers treasure 1 Samuel as the story of how God gave Israel its greatest king, and many still pray for the coming of a son of David. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, believed that promise came true in Jesus. Matthew's very first line calls Him "Jesus Christ, the son of David." Paul reminded his listeners that God called David "a man after my heart, who will do all my will." And Mary, pregnant with Jesus, sang a song that sounds a lot like Hannah's: "He has put down princes from their thrones, and has exalted the lowly." Like David, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, anointed by God's Spirit, and rejected by the powerful. But where David spared his enemy, Jesus died for His enemies. And where David's kingdom eventually fell, Jesus' kingdom will never end.

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. He looks at the heart, and He knows yours completely.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all rejected God as King.

Israel told God they wanted a different king. The Bible says all of us have tried to run our own lives instead of letting Him lead.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. Saul's story shows how sin destroys. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus is the true Anointed King.

David fought Goliath for his people. Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again, defeating sin and death for everyone who trusts Him.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

David was chosen not because he was the biggest or the oldest. Salvation isn't a reward for being impressive. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Make Him your King.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've wanted to run my own life instead of letting You be my King. I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You that You look at the heart, and that You love me anyway. Thank You that Jesus, the true Anointed King, gave His life for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. Speak, Lord, for I'm listening. Forgive me and change my heart. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read 1 Samuel 3, 16, and 17, then read Psalm 23, written by the shepherd who became king, and Luke 1.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Find a Jonathan. Look for a friend who will strengthen your faith, and be that kind of friend for someone else.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Samuel didn't recognize God's voice the first three times either. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if 1 Samuel is right, the God who looked past the tall king and chose the shepherd boy is looking at your heart right now, and He is still calling.

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Don't look on his face, or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for I don't see as man sees. For man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

1 Samuel 16:7 (WEB)