**The birth of Samuel**  Text: 1Samuel 1:1-20

 *(Scripture quotes from the New King James Version unless otherwise indicated)*

Not long ago we reading through the nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ. In doing so, we read the song of Mary or Magnificat as it is called: ‘My soul magnifies the Lord’ (Luke 1:46). This song has a lot in common with that of another woman giving birth to special child, namely the song or prayer of Hannah. Mary’s child was of course, super special as the only begotten Son of God, but Hannah’s son was a wonderful answer to prayer, and also special as a Nazirite and prophet of God. In fact, Hannah’s situation was more like that of Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth, who was old and without children when she gave birth to John the Baptist, the last of the OT prophets.

Samuel was the first of the prophets to serve God under a king in Israel. Samuel was instrumental in establishing the monarchy in Israel. Since the time the nation was established under the leadership of Moses, God was regarded as their king- it was a theocracy. After the conquest of Canaan led by Joshua, the nation was ruled by judges chosen by God. But corruption and apostasy increased, along with military losses, until at the end of this era of some fourteen hundred years, anarchy reigned, with ‘everyone doing what was right in his own eyes’ (Judg 21:25). The Book of Judges ends with these words, and the reminder that, ‘these was no king in Israel’. When the Lord again speaks to his people through his prophet Samuel, the Lord gives his nation a human king.

**1. The Book of Samuel**

Why are we turning to the Book of Samuel today? Partly because we have studied Joshua and Judges previously, and the Book or Books of Samuel continue the history of God’s people, as just indicated. One and two Samuel were originally one book that was divided for convenience when the Hebrew Bible was translated in the Greek- the Septuagint. The name ‘Samuel’ was given because he was the prophet who anointed the first two kings of Israel, Saul and David. ‘Samuel’ means ‘heard of God’ or as we read, ‘Because I have asked him from the Lord’ (1:20). He was an answer to prayer *par excellence*! It is interesting that it is the nativity of Samuel and not the two kings that is recorded. We might compare the nativity of Moses, as well as that of John the Baptist, and of Jesus, as we did in our introduction.

Another reason for studying this book is the insight it gives into the life of David. Many of the Psalms that we sing were written by David, and sometimes the title of the Psalm tells us the context in which it was written. For example, when we look at Psalm 3 we find that it was written when David fled from his son Absalom. We went back and read of this incident as recorded in 2Samuel. These is no book called ‘David’ but the Book of Psalms could bear his name!

Although David wrote many Psalms, there is no indication that he wrote the Book of Samuel, even though he is still alive at the end of the book. We do not know who wrote this book, although we are told about a book of Jashar (2Sam 1:18), and about records written in books of ‘Samuel the seer, Nathan the prophet, and Gad the seer’ (2Chron 29:29). What we do know is that it a book written by a person inspired of the Holy Spirit (2Peter 1:21).

David, as we will learn, was the greatest king of Israel. He became king at the age of thirty and ruled for forty years. His pathway to the throne was beset with many dangers and threats to his life, from King Saul in particular. In this book we find our favourite Bible stories like, the boy Samuel, Saul and the lost donkeys, and especially David and Goliath. These stories all fit into the big picture of the Bible. They are part of the history, or what Jesus calls, ‘the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms’ that pointed forward to him (Luke 24:44).

As the Son of Mary, Jesus was a descendant of David. He was born in Bethlehem, the city of David. Paul refers to Jesus as the Son of David: ‘Born of the seed of David according to the flesh’ (Rom 1:3). God made a covenant with David which was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, and his exaltation to the throne of God in heaven (cf. 2Sam 7:12-16). The Book of Samuel is rarely quoted in the NT, but we do find Paul referring to it in 2Corinthians 6:18, and there are many allusions to the life of David in particular, ‘a man after God’s own heart’ (Acts 13:22).

**2. The birth of Samuel**

During the dark years following the death of Samson at the hand of the Philistines, we learn of a family living in the hills of Ephraim just north of Jerusalem- Jerusalem was not yet conquered by the Israelites. Elkanah is called ‘an Ephraimite’ (1:1), but it is not clear if this refers to his tribe or his place of residence; elsewhere his lineage shows him to be of the tribe of Levi (1Chron 6:22-26). Elkanah had two wives; polygamy was not uncommon in those days. Some think this points to him being a rich man, but most likely he took a second wife because his first wife had no children.

Elkanah was a god-fearing man who worshipped the Lord according to the Law of Moses. The Ark of the Covenant that the people had carried with them from Mt Sinai was located in Shiloh at this time. The Law of Moses required all adult males to go up to the house of God three times a year. Elkanah went up each year from his city called Ramah, for short, ‘to worship and sacrifice to the Lord of hosts’ or the Lord Almighty (1:1,3). This particular feast may have been the Feast of Tabernacles, a joyous festival frequented by families after the summer harvest. His two wives, Hannah and Peninnah, accompanied Elkanah to the sanctuary in Shiloh, some 10km east of Ramah.

Apart from being a god-fearing man, Elkanah appears to be a loving husband and father. He gave his wives and children portions of meat from the offering he made to the Lord at Shiloh. It is written that ‘he loved Hannah’ even though she was barren, and he gave her a ‘double portion’: ‘The Lord had closed her womb’ (1:5). Elkanah, like David and Solomon, saw children as a gift from God (Ps 127:3). Hannah also understood that children are a gift from God because she asked God to give her a child, a male child (1:11).

The story of Samuel’s miraculous birth would not be complete without a ‘down-to-earth’ touch of rivalry between two women, in this case two wives. When Sarah could not have children she gave her maid to Abraham. After bearing a son, the maid despised Sarah, and she in turn treated Hagar harshly and sent her away (Gen 16:4f). Being unable to have children was a great shame for a woman in those days. Hannah faced the added hurt of a spiteful, rival wife called Peninnah, who gave Elkanah sons and daughters. Peninnah ‘provoked her severely and made her life miserable because the Lord had closed her womb’ (1:6). Her misery came to a head when each year they made a pilgrimage to the house of the Lord. Hannah became so miserable that she wept all the time and stopped eating.

Hannah’s behaviour was upsetting to Elkanah, who loved her. He asked why she wept and refused to eat anything. Some think he was rebuking Hannah, and even translate, ‘Why is your heart bad?’ instead of, ‘Why is your heart sad?’, but more likely he was trying to comfort her. His words, ‘Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?’ seem to have encouraged Hannah (1:8 NIV). She got up from the table and went to the tent of meeting where she poured out her heart to the Lord (1:10). This tent was the one set up by Moses but may have been made a little more permanent than it was in the desert. The priest, Eli, was sitting at the doorpost, from where he watched Hannah praying (1:9, 12).

Eli, along with his two sons, Hophni (‘Tadpole’) and Phinehas (‘the Nubian’), served as priests at the tabernacle, sacrificing the animals brought by worshippers and presumably attending to the lamps and the showbread (1:3). The Ark of the Covenant and the priesthood feature prominently in the book of Samuel, mainly by way of ritual desecration, corruption and immorality. The situation had become so bad that the Lord stepped in to judge the wicked and revive true religion in his chosen nation. Through Samuel, the Lord resumed communication with his people (3:1). Many years later, the Lord again stepped in to judge his people through the prophet Jeremiah, and then in the NT he came and spoke to us by his Son, Jesus Christ (Heb 1:2). This same Jesus will come again to judge the world in righteousness, to condemn the wicked and to save those whom he made righteous through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Hannah’s earnest prayer to ‘the Lord Almighty’ was offered up with utmost humility and profound faith. She had nowhere else to go but to the Lord and so she prayed to the Lord, knowing he was powerful to grant her request. She pleaded with the Lord to remember her, or to look upon her in mercy. She specifically asked the Lord to give her a son, promising that she would dedicate this boy to the Lord as a Nazirite and ‘give him to the Lord all the days of his life’ (1:11). The Nazirite vow meant no cutting of hair or drinking of strong drink. In Israel, the firstborn son belonged to the Lord and had to be redeemed with a blood sacrifice (Exod 13:15). Hannah’s vow was to give her son to the Lord literally.

Hannah was a woman of faith, ready to give her most precious possession to the Lord. Is this something you are ready to do? Hannah also has something to teach us about prayer, about pouring out our heart to the Lord. She knew the same ‘throne of grace’ that we know, even though she did not know Jesus as her mediator as we do- which makes her prayer all the more amazing, and maybe a rebuke to you regarding your prayers.

Eli’s reaction to Hannah praying shines light upon the darkness of worship in those days. Hannah’s lips were moving but no words were coming out because she spoke in her heart (1:13). Eli was accustomed to seeking intoxicated people coming to the house of the Lord, and accused Hannah of being drunk in the house of the Lord (1:13,14). Hannah responded to his rebuke saying she was not drunk but a woman in deep sorrow, pouring out her heart to the Lord (1:15). Eli accepted the rebuke and proceeded to pronounce God’s blessing upon her. So it was that Hannah went away having received the blessing of God through the priest. The very recording of this interaction between priest and worshipper shows how unusual it was in these days, days of corruption from the priests down.

Hannah felt assured of God’s peace, and indeed of his answer to her prayer, as she left the house of God. She got up early the next morning to worship with her husband before heading home to Ramah. Back home, Elkanah ‘knew his wife Hannah’ and she conceived- or as we read, ‘The Lord remembered her’ (1:19). The womb that the Lord had closed was about to be opened! In the ‘normal’ course of events, Hannah gave birth to a son and named him Samuel, saying, ‘Because I have asked the Lord for him’ (1:20).

**Promise kept with prayer of praise**  Text: 1Samuel 1:21-2:11

On my recent holiday I read a book by Timothy Keller entitled ‘Hope in Times of Fear’. In this he writes about the ‘great reversal’. The story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 is a case in point. Lazarus was a poor beggar in this world but was exalted to the bosom of Abraham after his death. In this world everyone would have known the name of the rich man, but as Jesus told this story, only the beggar is named. Jesus helped and healed lepers, blind people and cripples, beggars and children and widows, as well as despised people like tax-collectors (cf. Mat 11:5). Jesus preached ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (Mat 4:17). The kingdom of heaven looks very different to the kingdoms of this world.

Reversals are also seen across the OT; they are seen here in the 1Samuel. Such reversals often involved women, who had little social power in ancient societies, and still in some societies today; actually, the reversal we see in today’s text involves two women. The previous book in our Bibles is about Ruth, about her faithfulness to her mother-in-law, and then her faith in God. 1Samuel begins with the focus on a childless woman called Hannah, living in the hills of Ephraim.

What we read in the Bible was not headline news in ancient Israel but it was very important in the purposes of God. If you are caught up in the 24hr news cycle of sport, politics and celebrities, remember that God sees beyond this superficial world, and he is very good at lifting up the lowly and putting down the proud, or making the rich poor and the poor rich (2:7, Luke 1:51-53, Mat 5:1-10).

When Hannah prayed with tears and no audible voice, the Lord heard her prayer. We know this because he gave her the male child she asked for. She called her son Samuel. But Hannah knew he was more than her son- he belonged to the Lord. Hannah had promised to, ‘give her son to the Lord all the days of his life’ (1:11). We see her keeping her promises in our first subheading today. The second part of our sermon will focus on the prayer of Hannah.

**1. Promise kept**

We have seen Hannah’s faith in bringing the concerns of her heart and life to the Lord in prayer. She knew the Lord is gracious and powerful to grant our requests. We now see that she was faithful in keeping the promise or vow she made to the Lord in her prayer. We are not to start ‘bargaining’ with the Lord in our prayers. We must be careful in making any vows, but it is not wrong to do so. What is very wrong is to go back on any vow or promise we make.

Hannah’s decision not to go up to the house of God until Samuel was weaned is quite understandable. Actually, it would be even more difficult to hand over her little boy at a later time. Some know the reality of separation from a young child, but all of us, I hope, feel something of the pain of separation experienced by Hannah. Her pain was self-inflicted, but her vow was not a rash vow and she had no intention of dishonouring it. The Lord takes promises or vows very seriously, and so must we- another feature of the great reversal! The Lord declares, ‘Those who honour me I will honour’ (2:30).

Elkanah and his family continued their pattern of worship, each year going up to the house of the Lord with a sacrifice (1:21). What does the reference to ‘his vow’ in verse 21 mean? Had Elkanah made his own vow regarding Hannah, or something else? Or had he taken on Hannah’s vow, and taken to reminding the Lord she, and he, had not forgotten this vow? His reply to Hannah when she told him she would not go up until Samuel was weaned point to Elkanah not only knowing, but also approving, and indeed being bound by Hannah’s vow: ‘Let the Lord establish his word’ (1:23). Keeping this vow would be the fulfilment of Hannah’s prayer, to the Lord’s word being established. If Hannah had selfishly gone back on her vow the Lord would not have been pleased. He had great plans for this special child.

‘After he was weaned she took the boy with her, young as he was, along with a three year old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine and brought him to the house of the Lord in Shiloh’ (1:24 NIV). Samuel was probably around 3yrs old. Why a 3yr bull old as a sacrifice (some versions have three bulls)? A bull was a huge sacrifice, but nothing compared to the sacrifice Hannah was making. In passing, note that those few early years are very important in the development of a child. Samuel grew up in a godly home, watching his mother pray and his father going off to worship the Lord. When he was given back to the Lord to serve in the house of God he was obedient to Eli and attentive to the voice of the Lord.

Upon arrival at the house of the Lord, the family sacrificed the bull and brought Samuel to Eli the priest (1:25). Hannah reminded Eli that she was the woman he rebuked for being drunk when she was praying for a child. She acknowledged that the Lord had answered her earnest prayer and given her a son, and that now she was giving this child back to the Lord- or in the beautiful words of our Bible, ‘I also have lent him to the Lord’ (1:28). She had brought this answer-to-prayer child for dedication at the house of the Lord. Her dedication meant literally leaving her child in the Lord’s house to serve the Lord all the days of his life. Hannah worshipped the Lord and returned home with her family, minus her beloved son Samuel- but not before she uttered the prayer or song of praise that we now come to.

**2. Prayer of Hannah**

After leaving her precious son with the Lord at Shiloh, Hannah was overcome with joy rather than sadness: ‘My heart rejoices in the Lord’ (2:1). The Lord is powerful to bless those who obey him, to bless not just with material things but with peace and joy in the heart. Has this been your experience when you obey the Lord, even when it is hard to do so? He blessed Hannah with more children (2:21), but her rejoicing was in the Lord himself not just in what he gave her. Her Spirit-inspired prayer begins with personal rejoicing but ends with a prophecy affecting ‘the ends of the earth’ (2:10). We have previously noted the similarity of Hannah’s prayer or song or psalm with the song of Mary in Luke 1. Both focus on the theme of the great reversal. We see this particularly in the middle section of this prayer. The first section is in praise of God who is sovereign.

In this prayer Hannah refers to various attributes of the Lord of hosts, or almighty God. In the first two verses she refers to God’s salvation and his uniqueness in being holy and being like a rock. By putting her trust in such a God, Hannah could ‘smile at her enemies’ (2:1). She may have regarded Peninnah as an enemy; she certainly gave Hannah a hard time. But there is no sense of revenge or spiteful gloating in Hannah’s prayer. Hannah rejoices in the fact that God remembered her and saved her from her affliction- of being childless. ‘Holy’ carries the idea of separation or ‘otherness’; here it probably refers to purity also. Hannah cried to the Lord, knowing he would hear her prayer and was powerful to grant her request. She came to him as a rock when her life was in turmoil. You can do the same when you feel that the whole world is against you! The words of verse 2 are most suitable for beginning your prayer.

The second section of this prayer, from verse 3 to 8a, is in praise of the God of reversals. Hannah speaks to people who are proud and arrogant, to men who exalt themselves because of their affluence or physical strength. The Lord she worships is powerful to bring down the rich and powerful, and raise up those who are poor or weak. She does not confine her comments to her rival, Peninnah, although she does make another pointed comment in saying, ‘even the barren has born seven, and she who has many children has become feeble’ (2:5b). Hannah went on to have five more children (2:21). The seven here in verse 5 is symbolic of completion or perfection.

To the Lord’s attributes of holiness and power we find Hannah adding God’s knowledge and role as judge; ‘by Him actions are weighed’ (2:3). We learn from Psalm 139 and other passages that God is omnipotent and omniscient. We soon learn that God opposes the proud and arrogant; King Saul become such a man. We will learn that being king in God’s kingdom is not like being king in other kingdoms, just as we must realise that being a leader in the church is not like being a leader in secular organisations. Jesus said, I have not come to be served but to serve’ (Mark 10:45).

In the kingdom of God the arrogant will be made to eat their words, and the weapons of the mighty will be broken (2:3, 4). ‘Those who stumbled are girded with strength’, while those who stand in their own strength will stumble. Moreover, ‘Those who hunger will hunger no more’, but those who are full find themselves searching for bread (2:5). We recall the Magnificat, and the words, ‘He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away’ (Luke 1:53). Jesus said the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount, so please take these words seriously. We live in a society that laughs at such words, with even churches preaching, ‘God helps those who help themselves’. Dear friend, God helps those who realise they are nothing and have nothing without Jesus, and who humble themselves before Him. So stop looking to the world and start looking to Jesus if you want to know the blessings and the joy that Hannah knew.

In this central section of her prayer Hannah goes on to speak about reversals orchestrated by almighty God. ‘He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the beggar from the ash heap’ (2:8). We are reminded of Job, who was once rich but, in the purposes of God, found himself literally on the ash heap. He refused to curse God and eventually God exalted him to an even higher place, even in this world. The beggar Lazarus was exalted to a higher place after death. His exaltation was permanent, just as the rich man’s condemnation to torment was permanent.

Hannah acknowledges that the Lord ‘brings down to the grave and brings up’ (6:6), a profound comment upon God’s power to raise the dead, unless the reference to ‘bringing up’ is to giving life in the womb. Hannah speaks of the poor being raised up to ‘sit with princes’, words that are prophetic in terms of the role her son will play in anointing a forgotten boy like David to be king of Israel.

The third and final section of Hannah’s prayer is in praise of ‘God the judge’. Reid writes, ‘The Lord who established the world is able to turn it to His purposes at His will. If this is so, He is able to upturn humans in their pride and exalt the humble’. As much as the secular and social media continue exalting the rich and famous, who are usually proud and arrogant, the Lord is working to put them down. The Lord is working to ‘guard the feet of his saints’ who are often used and abused by men and women in their efforts to become rich and famous. Even at this present time the rich and famous are learning that they are not able to control the COVID virus sweeping our globe. ‘For by his strength no man shall prevail’ (2:9). What a great take-home lesson for us today, a lesson for us to remember and to share with people around us.

The creator God is the same God who will judge this world in righteousness. The Lord will thunder from heaven against his enemies (2:10). Israel, under the leadership of Samuel, routed the Philistines when the Lord ‘thundered with loud thunder upon the Philistines’ (7:10). Our ‘experts’ attribute the ‘increasing frequency and intensity of storms’ to man-made climate change, but should we not consider that God in his anger is thundering against a society that has rejected him?

Hannah’s last words are prophetic, prophetic of Messiah. All kings were ‘anointed’, a translation of the Hebrew word ‘messiah’ (2:10). God gave strength to his anointed kings, men like Saul and David, but even David did not ‘judge the ends of the earth’ (2:10). It is the Son of David who is our Lord Jesus Christ who will, in the fullness of time, rule and judge to the ends of the earth.

**Corruption and immorality in the house of God** Text: 1Samuel 2:12-26

When God made a covenant with the people he saved out of Egypt, he told them how they were to worship him. The second half of the Book of Exodus is all about the building of a house of worship and the ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests. As priests, they conducted worship that involved animal sacrifices and other offerings the people brought to the Lord. When the Lord brought the people into Canaan, the tent of meeting was set up at Shiloh, just north of Jerusalem. As a theocracy, the priests effectively ruled in Israel, although the Lord raised up judges from time to time to administer justice and lead the people in battle against enemies. The tribes were not always united, but there was one place where all came to worship- until Jeroboam set up his gold calves as alternative places of worship.

We do not hear much about the priesthood during the days of the Judges, but with ‘everyone doing what was right in his own eyes’ (Judg 21:25), clearly the priesthood was in a bad state (cf. Judg 17:5). Here in 1Samuel, the extent of the ‘rot’ within the priesthood is portrayed in shocking detail. The extent of the decline is highlighted by a comparison of two families, the family of Elkanah and Hannah, and the family of Eli the priest. The godliness of Hannah in teaching her infant son, and in keeping her vow by giving Samuel to serve the Lord, stands in contrast to the failure of Eli to teach or discipline his sons. The corruption of the priesthood contributed to the demand for a king.

**1. Corrupt priests**

The significance of the insignificant, barren woman called Hannah from the hills of Ephraim having a son starts to become clear when we hear about the sons of Eli. We previously noted the corruption within the population when Eli mistook Hannah’s behaviour in prayer for that of a drunk woman. But Eli listened to Hannah’s rebuke and blessed her. When she brought her infant son to Eli, he took Samuel ‘under his wing’ and went on to bless Elkanah and his wife when they came each year to worship in Shiloh (2:20).

The wonderful story of the birth of Samuel and the whole-hearted rejoicing in the Lord of his parents (2:1) comes to an abrupt end with the words, ‘Now the sons of Eli were corrupt/wicked’ (2:12). The Hebrew reads, ‘were sons of Belial’ meaning, ‘sons of Satan’. Declaring the priests of the Lord to be sons of Satan is tragic but by no means unique in the history of worship under the old covenant, or the new. What did Jeremiah find in his day but corrupt priests, and what did Jesus find, and what do we find in our day? Is it time for judgment to begin in the house of God (1Peter 4:17)?

Before telling us about the wickedness of the sons of Eli, the narrator says, ‘They did not know the Lord’ (2:12). Knowledge of the Lord was basic to the covenant relationship the Lord had established with his people. This relationship was marked by the fear of God, by faith, and by obedience and devotion. The sons of Eli had grown up in a priestly family and were set aside to serve the Lord in the tent of meeting. But they failed to understand the covenant and the responsibilities of the office they inherited. They accepted the privileges and abused these privileges as they satisfied the lusts of the flesh.

The first sin of the sons of Eli was corruption with regard to the sacrifices, and the second with the people, especially the women, bringing the sacrifices. The people wanted a king to be like other nations but these priests were a step ahead, already behaving like the priests of other nations.

Under the covenant established through Moses, priests were well provided for. In addition to getting a share of the offerings brought by the people, they were allocated specific ‘cuts’ from the animals they sacrificed on behalf of the worshipper. They were allowed to take the right thigh and breast (Lev 7:31, 32). The meat of the sacrifice was boiled, except for the Passover lamb. The priests at Shiloh had adopted their own custom it seems (2:13,14); they sent a servant with a ‘three- pronged fleshhook’ to thrust into the pot of boiling meat and took to the priest whatever this hook brought out. Maybe they reasoned that whatever the fleshhook brought up was by divine providence, but it was still a violation of the divine command.

The sons of Eli went a step further and demanded raw meat for roasting (2:15). As we know, roasted meat tastes better with the fat on. But under the law given to Moses, the fat of the sacrifice belonged to the Lord, and had to be burned (Lev 3:3-5, 16). The priest was not free to take whatever portion he demanded, and certainly not free to take what belonged to the Lord.

Under the old covenant the Lord gave instructions as to how he was to be worshipped, and he has done the same under the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ. Let no one presume they are free ‘adapt’ the way they worship as they see fit, especially when such ‘adaptions’ are for the benefit of themselves- which is usually the case!

Even the worshippers at Shiloh knew that the fat of their sacrifices belonged to the Lord (2:16). They put up with the priests stealing meat that belonged to them and their children, but taking the fat portion was a sin against God. When they told the servants or the ‘thugs’ of the priests, they were met with threats of violence: ‘Give it now or we will take it by force’ (2:16). The narrator makes the solemn and ominous comment: ‘The sin of the young men was very great in the Lord’s sight, for they were treating the Lord’s offering with contempt’ (2:17 NIV).

We come across churches in which worshippers know the truth of the gospel better than their pastor. We also see churches in which worship is no longer reverent, and may be rejected by the Lord. We must worship the Lord with reverence and godly fear or awe (Heb 12:28). We must worship in ways that are acceptable to the Lord, which means in ways that the Lord has ordained in his word.

The narrator pauses to draw a contrast: ‘But Samuel ministered before the Lord’ (2:18). But we will continue for the moment with the wicked sons of Eli and touch on Eli’s response to their wickedness. Their wickedness extended to sexual immorality, to sleeping with women coming to the tent of meeting (2:22). ‘They had turned the tabernacle into a brothel, a place where sin was committed rather than confessed’ (Davis). When there is no fear of God, when reverence and awe go out the door, all manner of wickedness enters in, and all aspects of life are corrupted. Again, we know churches that no longer regard the Bible as the word of God, and see these same churches accepting adultery, as well as homosexuality, in their male and female pastors. They argue that such behaviour is permissible under the law of the land. Eli’s sons, no doubt, argued that prostitution was permissible for pagan priests so why not for them.

**2. Conduct of Eli**

‘Now Eli was very old’ (2:22). This comment is given as fact, not as an excuse for his behaviour as father of Hophni and Phinehas. We have seen him blessing Elkanah and Hannah, and maybe envying them as parents of a boy like Samuel. The fact is, Eli knew what his sons were doing but did nothing to stop them, apart from speaking a few words, which they ignored. Their immoral behaviour was common knowledge in the land. The people were complaining to Eli about his sons and asking why he did nothing to stop them. Why was he letting them corrupt their worship? Sure, he was old and his sons might have ‘roughed’ him up, but he could have removed them from their roles within the house of God.

We will see that Eli was severely reprimanded when an unknown ‘man of God’ came to announce judgment upon his sons (2:27). He rebuked his sons but they did not listen (2:25). Clearly, he had failed to teach them obedience and the fear of God when they were growing up- in contrast to the parents of Samuel. He may have been a loving father, but love must include correction and discipline, especially when they are young. His sons were now adults, so what could Eli do? If they were simply adults in the wider population he could not do much besides grieve and pray. But they were priests in the house of God and he should have removed them! The apostle Paul insisted that a sexually immoral member of the church at Corinth be cut off from the church and handed over to Satan (1Cor 5:4, 5).

Eli admitted that his sons were making the Lord’s people transgress (2:24). He makes the profound and prophetic comment: ‘If one man sins against another, God will judge him. But if a man sins against the Lord, who will intercede for him’? (2:25). Who indeed! All sin is against God but some sin is in direct defiance of God, sin akin to ‘trampling the Son of God underfoot, to counting the blood of the covenant … a common thing, and insulting the Spirit of grace’ (Heb 10:29). These words apply to the new covenant, which makes them all the more relevant to us. But we have a picture of trampling on the blood of the sacrifice and treating God’s holy law with contempt here with the sons of Eli. Eli was, in effect, telling his sons, ‘It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God’ (Heb 10:31). The prophetic aspect of his words to his sons is that, under the new covenant, God has provided a mediator for us in his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ (Heb 7:25, 26).

The apostle Paul writes of the immoral man being ‘handed over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord’ (1Cor 5:5). Eli refused to remove his sons from ministry, but the Lord would do so. In fact, he had already willed to do so by killing them (2:25). ‘God will not be mocked’ (Gal 6:7), or as God says here in verse 30, ‘Those who honour me I will honour, but those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed’. The Lord willed to put these reprobates to death. The sovereign, omnipotent and holy God had given these impudent and immoral priests up to the lusts of the flesh for the destruction of the flesh.

**3. Quiet Samuel**

‘But Samuel ministered before the Lord, even as a child, wearing a linen ephod’ (2:18). Back in verse 11 we also read of Samuel ministering to the Lord before Eli the priest, and again in the first verse of the next chapter. The narrator cannot refer to Eli’s sons as ‘ministering before the Lord’ but points to the child as doing so! Samuel, as we will see, obey the voice of Eli and then the voice of the Lord- Eli’s sons did neither. Even as the Lord willed to kill Hophni and Phinehas, he was preparing a new man to minister before him as priest, as well as prophet and also judge in Israel (7:6, 9).

To sharpen the contrast between the two families, we are reminded of the sacrifice Hannah made in lending her son to the Lord (1:28). Each year she made her growing son a new robe and brought it to Shiloh when she came with her husband to ‘offer the yearly sacrifice’ (2:19). The linen ephod was a sleeveless garment that priests wore over their robe. The description of Samuel’s growth and development is similar to the description of Jesus’ growth as a child (2:21, 26, Luke 2:52).

‘The key note of verse 19-21 is Yahweh’s generous kindness in giving Hannah five additional children’. ‘The Lord visited Hannah, so that she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters’ (2:21). As we just noted, ‘The Lord honours those who honour him’, and he is powerful to bless those who look to him for blessing. That Eli could bless Elkanah and his wife in the name of the Lord makes his failure to bring blessing to his own family especially tragic, and is a stark warning to all servants of the Lord, and indeed all fathers, with regard to teaching their children.

**Divine judgment declared on Eli’s family**  Text: 1Samuel 2:27-36

‘For all that is in the world- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life- is not of the Father but is of the world’ (1John 3:16). The sons of Eli were called to a high calling as priests in the house of God. They were called to stand between God and the people, administering the laws of God with regard to worship, and possessing the means of finding out the will of God, namely the Urim and Thummin.

God promised to provide for his priests, for those whom he called, but Eli’s sons forgot the responsibilities and the holiness of their calling, and the promises of God. They let the lusts of the flesh and of the eyes take control of their lives. Not content with God’s provisions, they became greedy: ‘Their God is their belly and their glory their shame’ (Phil 3:19). Not content with God’s blessing of marriage, they lusted after other women. They refused to listen to warnings from their father and from the people who came to worship, because the Lord willed to kill them (2:25). These men were not the first whom God willed to kill for desecrating the house of God and bringing shame upon his holy name- recall Aaron’s two sons Nadab and Abihu offering profane fire before the Lord (Lev 10:1,2)- and they are not the last!

In the passage we just read, a man of God comes to Eli the priest with a word from the Lord. It is a word of judgment upon Eli and his sons: ‘In one day they shall die, both of them’ (2:34). If Eli or his sons thought they were in any way indispensable, and that no one could touch them, they were tragically mistaken. ‘God will not be mocked’ (Gal 6:7). If they presumed that under God’s covenant they could indulge the flesh with impunity, they were similarly mistaken. Our first subheading is, ‘Aaron chosen and provided for’, our second, ‘Accusation’ and our third, ‘Announcement of judgment’.

**1. Aaron chosen and blessed**

The narrator tells us of the sins of Eli’s sons, of Eli speaking to them but failing to remove them from duty in the house of God. Then there is a brief word about Samuel growing in favour with the Lord and with men (2:26). The words here at the end of this chapter are those of a ‘man of God’ who came to Eli (2:27). Who was this ‘man of God’? We do not know, but the term usually refers to a prophet, and like a prophet, this man speaks a word from the Lord: ‘Thus says the Lord’ (2:27). In the first verse of chapter 3 we read that ‘the word of the Lord was rare in those days’, so this was one of these rare occasions, and tragically, it was a word of judgment.

Before announcing divine judgment upon Eli and his sons, this man of God reminded Eli of the blessings he had received from the Lord as a priest in the line of Aaron. Aaron was in Egypt with Moses, watching the people of God suffer at the hands of the Pharaoh. In a display of almighty power and judgment, the Lord brought his people out of Egypt. At Mt Sinai, the Lord appeared to Moses, giving him instructions regarding how He was to be worshipped. Aaron was called by God and installed as high priest. The whole tribe of Levi was set apart as priests. They were not given land but were given ‘all the offerings of the children of Israel made by fire’ (2:28). Eli’s sons were not satisfied with what the Lord provided. Like the ungodly, they went grasping for more, never satisfied or content with the Lord’s provision.

Aaron and his descendants, including Eli and his sons, were called and entrusted with solemn and sacred duties in the house of God or tent of meeting. The man of God reminds Eli that he was given ‘to wear an ephod before the Lord’ (2:28). The Lord gave Moses specific instructions regarding the dress of the high priest. On the ephod was the breastplate containing the Urim and Thummim, ‘stones’ by which the priests gave decisions from the Lord. Only the priest could offer sacrifices on the bronze altar, and go into the holy place to burn incense (2:28).

The priest was essential to worship in Israel and to giving decisions from the Lord. Corruption of this sacred office was taken most seriously by the Lord God who gave the instructions as to how he was to be worshipped. The Lord Jesus called and appointed twelve men called apostles, to preach and teach the gospel, including the way in which the Lord is to be worshipped under the new covenant. Their instructions are preserved in the NT, but elders are appointed to oversee worship in the church today (1Tim 5:17f).

**2. Accusations**

Having reminded Eli of the privileged position and the provisions he and his sons were given as priests in the house of God, the man of God asks why he and his sons had corrupted the worship of God. His specific words are: ‘Why do you kick at My sacrifice and My offering’ (2:29). We know how his sons were demanding the best ‘cuts’ from the sacrifices of the people, and taking more than their allotted portion. If they were living with Eli, he would have been sharing in this greed. Eli died at the age of 98yrs, ‘old and heavy’ (4:18).

The second charge brought against Eli was that he was honouring his sons more than the Lord (2:29). In India, weddings are lavish affairs. From the day a child is born, parents start saving for their wedding. Often parents take out loans to pay for the wedding, huge loans. One pastor decided to take a loan from the funds of the church, fully intending to pay the money back of course. Maybe he reasoned that as pastor he had to honour his daughter, even if it meant taking some of the Lord’s money. It is right for us to provide for our family, but not right to honour them more than the Lord. Jesus said, ‘He who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me’ (Mat 10:37). This sin of Eli was very serious in the eyes of the Lord, but sadly not uncommon among church leaders even today.

**3. Announcement of judgment**

‘Therefore the Lord God of Israel says’ (2:30). Against the background of God’s calling, and his assurance of provision for his priests, came the charges of, ‘kicking at My sacrifices’ and, ‘honouring your sons more than Me’. As we read here in verse 30, God honours those who honour him, but ‘those who despise Me shall be lightly esteemed’ or disdained. Eli refused to take action against his sons, so it was left to the Lord to take action against this whole family of priests.

The Lord had promised Aaron that his descendants would be priests, and their descendants priests, and so on for forever (2:30, Exod 29:9). One commentator writes of God’s judgments, ‘The first is the decision to reverse God’s previous promise of a perpetual priesthood because of Eli’s failure’; but God does not reverse his promises. The priesthood would continue in another branch of the family, and into a new priesthood with Jesus as the sole high priest forever. A preferable comment is, ‘The priesthood of Aaron’s house has not been annulled but rather, Eli and his house will be excluded from participation in this privilege because of their sin’.

The man of God told Eli that in the coming days the Lord would ‘cut off your arm and the arm of your father’s house’ (2:31). This is metaphorical language referring to the strength of those in Eli’s house. None of his descendants would live to be an old man like him. A long life was considered a blessing from God, so a shortened life pointed to the curse of God. This judgment upon Eli’s house is reaffirmed in the next verse (2:32), and again verse 33: they ‘shall die in the flower of their age’. God will bless the house of Israel, but not the house of Eli.

Despite God’s goodness towards Israel, he was about to bring calamity upon his own house (2:32). This may be a reference to the capture of the Ark of the Covenant by the Philistines at the same time as Hophni and Phinehas were killed (4:17). In God’s mercy ‘some’ or ‘one’ shall not be cut off (2:33- depending upon the translation). Some scholars point to Abiathar as the one whom the Lord allowed to live after Saul’s massacre of the priests at Nob (22:17-20). Abiathar was later removed from the priesthood by Solomon, ‘That he might fulfil the word of the Lord which he spoke concerning the house of Eli at Shiloh’ (1Kings 2:27).

How would Eli know that the words of this man of God were truly words of the Lord? The man gave Eli a sign that he would not miss, a sign that would shock him, even to his own death. His two sons, the men who were desecrating the house of the Lord at Shiloh, would die on the same day (2:34). They may well have been involved in the taking of the Ark of the Covenant into battle against the Philistines. Everything to them was mere ritual because, ‘they did not know the Lord’ (2:12). The Ark was taken into battle like some good-luck charm. It would be their last act in desecrating the holy objects and worship in the house of the Lord. It is interesting that only here are Eli’s sons named, after their initial naming in chapter 1:3. It is as if the very mention of their names brought shame and pain to the Lord, and even to the people of Israel.

The death of these corrupt priests, and of Eli himself, would not thwart the purposes of God. The Lord was not going back on any of his promises; he would fulfil his promise in another way. ‘I will raise up for myself a faithful priest. I will build him a sure house, and he shall walk before my anointed forever’ (2:35). There is a lot in this verse, and it is not easy to determine who the ‘faithful priest’ is. With the repeated references to Samuel growing in stature and ministering before the Lord, it is difficult to ignore his claim to the title, ‘faithful priest’ whom the Lord would raise up. Samuel would soon be established as a prophet and judge in Israel, but his wearing of a linen ephod and his ministering to the Lord in the house of the Lord points to Samuel being a priest.

Another contender for this title of ‘faithful priest’, according to some scholars, is Zadok the priest. This prophecy ends with the announcement that whoever is left in the house of Eli will be reduced to poverty, to begging for bread- a far cry from the greedy, lavish lifestyle of Eli and his sons (2:36). When Abiathar was expelled from the priesthood by Solomon, he probably ended up begging for bread. Eli’s line came to an end with Abiathar, who was removed by Solomon (1Kings 2:27). The king put a priest called Zadok in his place (1Kings 2:35). The line of Zadok continued until after the Exile.

But the ultimate fulfilment of this ‘faithful priest’ prophecy is Jesus Christ. Jesus was faithful in offering up himself as the sacrifice for our sins, the high priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek (Heb 6:20). The Levitical priesthood was fulfilled in the coming of the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ. Jesus is uniquely our great high priest. He lives forever, so will never have a successor or rival. Therefore, let us come Jesus, our faithful high priest, knowing that he intercedes for us before the throne of God in heaven.

**The Lord calls Samuel Text: 1Samuel 3:1-10**

‘The word of the Lord was rare in those days’ (3:1). What days is the narrator referring to? We are tempted to read this as prophecy applicable to our own day! The word of the Lord is certainly a rarity in our society, especially in our media. My local paper carries a Bible verse on the back page, paid for by a church. At Easter we might see a message from a church leader- hopefully one that contains a verse of the Bible. But the last time a verse was heard in the national media was the time Israel Folau was sacked for tweeting 1Corinthians 6:9. Compared to some countries, ours is awash with Bibles, but who is reading the Bible? Do we not have reason to conclude that the word of the Lord is rare in our day? The words of 1Samuel refer to the days of Samuel, of course. We have seen how the priests had corrupted the worship of the Lord, and have heard a prophecy of divine judgment upon them.

Here in chapter 3, we are reminded that, although the rituals of worship continued, there was no reverence for the Lord, and indeed, ‘No word from the Lord’. Our second subheading is, ‘Not Eli calling but the Lord’, and our third, ‘Not yet know the Lord’.

**1. No word from the Lord**

‘In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in their own eyes’ (Judg 21:25). This is what the Bible says about the days prior to the birth of Samuel. In the days of Samuel’s youth we read, ‘The word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no widespread revelation’ (3:1). The five books of Moses would have been available, preserved on a papyrus scroll and kept by the priests. The priests were supposed to read and meditate on these books, and read them aloud to the people each year, at least the Book of Deuteronomy. The Lord said to Joshua, ‘This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall mediate on it day and night that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it’ (Josh 1:8), and later: ‘There was not a word which Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before the assembly of Israel’ (Josh 8:35).

The word of the Lord was rare in the days of Eli the priest because the priests were not reading the Book of the Law. They were conducting worship according to rituals handed down to them, but they ‘did not know the Lord’ (1:12). They were just that, rituals!

Along with the written word, the Lord spoke to his people in those days through prophets; His revelation was ongoing. Joshua was such a man, but in the times of the Judges, revelations or visions from the Lord were few and far between, just five ‘Angel of the Lord’ revelations in this entire period (2:1-3, 6:11-23, 7:2-11, 10:11-14, 13:3-21). Just before the Lord called Samuel, there was ‘the man of God’ who spoke to Eli (2:27).

In our day, the Last Days, the word of God is complete. Our Bible ends with the words, ‘If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book’ (Rev 22:18). We do not look for new revelations because none will be given. Similarly, we do not seek prophecy because the word of God is complete. God of course, does speak to us today through his word, the Bible, and through the illumination and understanding given by the Holy Spirit. We will come to the important matter of God’s call next.

**2. Not Eli but the Lord calling**

‘The boy Samuel ministered to the Lord before Eli’ (3:1). ‘Boy’ here refers to ‘youth’; Samuel was probably in his early teens. Eli was his *de facto* father as he lived in the tent of meeting with him. He grew up helping Eli maintain the house of God, which was erected semi-permanently at Shiloh; Eli’s sons would have been too busy sinning to maintain the place. Eli was old, and his sight was failing, so Samuel’s help would have been appreciated.

In the holy place of the tent of meeting was the golden lampstand. Its seven lamps were kept burning day and night - it was dark inside this tent without any windows. The lamps had to be ‘trimmed’ and supplied with oil regularly (Lev 24:3-4). In verse 3 we read, ‘Before the lamp of God went out in the tabernacle of the Lord, where the ark of God was’. The lamp was not supposed to go out, but would do so if the oil ran out. What it means for us in this story of Samuel is that it was early morning, probably just before dawn. Samuel was lying down in one room, with Eli also lying down in a room nearby, so it seems. We read that Samuel ran to Eli’s room when he heard a voice calling his name (3:5).

At the time, both Samuel and Eli were still in their beds. Samuel heard a voice calling his name, and dutifully answered saying, ‘Here I am’ (3:4). We are told that it was the Lord who called Samuel, but Samuel, who ‘did not yet know the Lord’ (3:7), naturally thought it was Eli calling him. And so begins this well-known and greatly-loved story of the Lord calling Samuel. Samuel ran to Eli saying, ‘Here I am, for you called me’ (3:5). Eli was surprised because he hadn’t called Samuel. Samuel probably woke him up! Samuel was told to go back and lie down, and he did as he was told; unlike Eli’s own sons! Again, the Lord called Samuel; this time we are told what we have assumed, namely, that he spoke the word ‘Samuel’ (3:6). Samuel heard the voice and again went to Eli’s room saying, ‘Here I am, for you called me’ (3:6). Eli again told the boy it was not him calling and to go back and lie down.

For a third time the Lord called Samuel, and for a third time he got up and went to Eli, telling him, ‘Here I am for you did call me’ (3:8). Samuel was in no doubt as to what he heard. Frustration and confusion was beginning to set in. But Eli woke up as to what was going on. His physical eyes were fading, but thankfully, his spiritual eyes were able to see that the Lord was calling the boy. Otherwise this back and forth would have continued! Eli comes across as a rather tragic figure, a man who knows the Lord yet was unable or unwilling to do what the Lord demanded with regard to his own family.

Eli illustrates the importance of a quality required in elders of the church, namely, ‘One who rules his own house well, having his children in submission, with all reverence (1Tim 3:4). The submission and obedience of his *de facto* son, Samuel, highlights the irreverence and disobedience of his own two sons. The sons were of course, breaking God’s law, which states: ‘Honour your father and your mother that your days may be long upon the land’ (Exod 20:12). His sons had not read this command, and Eli, it appears, did refer them to God’s holy law.

**3. Not yet know the Lord**

‘The sons of Eli were corrupt; they did not know the Lord’ (2:12). In verse 7 we read that, ‘Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord’; the word ‘yet’ being a key word. He did not yet know the Lord because ‘the word of the Lord was not yet revealed to him’. Samuel was hearing the voice of the Lord, and with the help of Eli was about to recognize and respond to that voice. Three times he had heard and failed to do so, but as he went back to his bed he was ready to respond if the Lord called him a fourth time. The Lord graciously called a fourth time, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ and Samuel answered just as Eli had advised him, ‘Speak, for your servant hears’ (3:9, 10).

How many times does the Lord have to speak to you before you hear his call? If you have not yet believed in Jesus, he is calling to you right now saying, ‘Come unto me all you who labour, and are heaven laden, and I will give you rest’ (Mat 11:28). If you are already a believer, he may be calling you to a particular work or ministry within his church. Maybe he has been preparing you for a task, just as he was preparing Samuel from his youth. Growing up in a Christian home is such a blessing, and is often preparation for serving the Lord in his church, if you are listening to the voice of the Lord. I wonder how many believers are being called, even more times than Samuel was called, but are still not stepping forward for a particular ministry, or going to a place where the Lord wants them.

The Lord’s call to Samuel would be for his whole life. The Lord still calls people today for such a commitment. But his call may simply be to go and speak to someone about Jesus. In India we spent a lot of time traveling on buses and trains; sometimes we spent two days on a train. I carried a gospel tract in my pocket and would ask the Lord to show me the person to whom I should give this tract. It was a bit like being at work, or going to see a neighbour. On one occasion I was riding through a village on my motorbike and felt the Lord calling me to stop and ask if we could gather the children to tell them a Bible story. Such instances are not comparable to the Lord’s call to Samuel, but are examples of looking to do the Lord’s will. His will for all of us, as written in the Bible, is to go into all the world and make disciples.

As I just said, the Lord in his grace still calls believers to mission fields and full-time ministry in his church. Such ministries can be costly, but the Lord never calls without providing the resources, to which I and others can bear witness. I was setting out in a career in agricultural research when I felt His call to use my skills to help people in a poor country. I started attending mission conferences with Elizabeth, and after a few years we asked to join as missionaries. The mission director, who was speaking at the conference, said that if anyone was unhappy in their workplace they need not apply. I took this to heart, and besides, they wanted us to do a year of Bible College, a daunting idea at the time! I withdrew my application, but kept on going to conferences. The Lord’s call did not go away; it became stronger, to the extent that a sickness led me to promise I would obey and go as the Lord called. And the rest is history as they say! In his grace, the Lord took us to India, the place where Elizabeth grew up, and to which she never wanted to return, and we spent thirteen years there.

My story is not unique, but I know it well. A missionary friend of mind once shared his experience of visiting many doctors trying to find the cause of his debilitating sickness until eventually, as he told me, he submitted to the call of the Lord; he is a still a missionary today. He, like me, could be labelled a poor listener to the voice of the Lord. But God was so patient and so gracious, and so persistent with us. We learned that the Lord can speak loud and clear when he wants. Remember His call to Moses from the burning bush!

The Lord was gracious and persistent with Samuel, calling him three times before he responded. He was just a youth of course, and maybe you are just a youth. But do listen out for the call of the Lord upon your life. Do listen to your elders, to men like Eli, who can give you advice and pray for you. Do not start making excuses like Moses, and so many. One woman felt called to the mission field, but could not bring herself to leaving her secure job. We need to remember what Jesus said about leaving everything to follow him (Mat 16:24). Let us put all we are, and everything we have, to the side when it comes to following Jesus. God’s final act of grace towards me was for me to resign my job, against lots of advice I might say. If I had not done that, and if we had not had people supporting us and praying for us, we would probably have returned before a terrible first year was over.

We conclude with a challenge for our church, and all churches today: if the word of the Lord is rare in our day, as I suggested at the beginning, are we praying for revival, are we praying for the Lord to speak again in our day? If and when he does, it will be through his word, through faithful preaching of his word and the outpouring of his Holy Spirit with that preaching. It will begin in his church. Are we ready for the Lord to speak to us?

**Samuel a prophet**  Text: 1Samuel 3:10-21

If you enter any old Presbyterian church you will find the pulpit at the centre of the stage; in some there is a flight of stairs going up to the pulpit. This is because the Reformers saw the preaching of the word of God as the central focus of worship. Contrast, if you will, churches that have pulpits to the side of a central table or altar; their focus is on the sacraments. Or contrast churches in which the central place is occupied by drums and guitars; their focus is on music and songs rather than the preached word. The question arises, ‘What do you come to church to see or hear?’ There were of course, people who followed Jesus, ‘not because you saw signs but because you ate of the loaves and were filled’ (John 6:26).

If you do come to listen to a sermon, what do you want to hear? Are you looking for words of comfort, words of reassurance, words about God’s love, or words of truth? These are not mutually exclusive of course, but words of truth may be words of discipline or judgment. ‘The word of God is living and powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword… a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart’ (Heb 4:12). Are you ready to listen to such a word?

The very first words of the young prophet called Samuel were words of judgment. The last of the OT prophets, John the Baptist, cried out, ‘Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath’ (Luke 3:7). Jesus began his ministry reading Scripture and preaching, ‘Today this Scripture is fulfilled on your hearing’ (Luke 4:21); he preached judgment, and was thrown out of town. I am not looking to be thrown out of town but I do seek to preach the truth, whether it be a word of hope and comfort, or a word of judgment. Because God’s word is truth I preach his word, not selectively but line by line because every word is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness (2Tim 3:16).

Samuel’s mother gave him to the Lord when he was weaned. He grew up in the house of God at Shiloh, with Eli the priest as his *de facto* father. He grew up seeing Eli’s sons disobeying the written word of God at every turn: disobeying their father, committing adultery, and stealing the Lord’s portion of the sacrifices. They did not teach the people the word of God as priests should because they did not know the Lord.

This chapter began with the solemn declaration: ‘The word of the Lord was rare in those days’ (3:1). We have heard the wonderful story of the Lord calling young Samuel, and of Samuel eventually saying, ‘Speak Lord, for your servant hears’ (3:10). The Lord spoke to Samuel ear-tingling words. Our second subheading is, ‘Samuel speaks to Eli’ and our third, ‘Samuel a prophet’.

**1. Speak Lord, for your servant hears**

Hearing a voice calling his name in the early hours of the morning, Samuel got up and ran to Eli saying, ‘Here I am’. The third time this happened, Eli told Samuel that if he heard the voice again he should say, ‘Speak Lord, for your servant hears’ (3:9). This Samuel did, and the Lord spoke to Samuel there in the tent of meeting at Shiloh.

After many years the Lord was again speaking to his people, or to Samuel at least. The Lord had stopped speaking to them through a prophet in the period of the Judges, a period when everyone ‘did what was right in his own eyes’. This sounds a bit like the days in which we live, does it not? From a young age, people have heard, ‘Be what you want to be, do what you want to do, Yea’- and look at the outcome! ‘Truth’, as the prophet Isaiah said, ‘has fallen in the street’ (Isa 59:14). Is the word of God being preached today? And who is listening? Will not our generation be held accountable by the Lord, just as the people of Samuel’s generation, and indeed of Isaiah’s and Jeremiah’s generation were held accountable?

When the Lord spoke to Samuel, what did he say? It was indeed a prophetic word, a revelation about what would soon happen in the land, or more precisely, what the Lord was about to do with Eli’s family. Everyone wants to know the future, and there is no shortage of people ready to tell the future, be it a man sitting by the roadside with a parrot ready to hop on a set of cards, or a person sitting by their computer extrapolating lines, as they see fit, decades into future. They can tell you what the temperature will be in thirty years, even if they can’t tell you what it will be next week! Economists predict what the interest rates will be next year because people want to know this, but they change the numbers week by week. No one it seems, bothers to check if their predictions ever come true.

People do not want to hear what God says about the future in the Bible, despite the fact that every word of God has come true, and will come true. God tells us what will come to pass so that we can prepare by repenting and believing in Jesus. Ditching your petrol car for an electric one will not save you!

The Lord revealed to Samuel, who was just a youth, a message that would make ‘both ears of everyone who hears it tingle’ (3:11). The message was one of judgment upon the house of Eli (3:12). Eli was at this time the leader of Israel. The people would soon be asking for a king, but at this time Eli was the leader. So this message of divine judgment upon Eli and his family would shock the nation. The people were very disappointed in Eli and his sons of course, but what God planned for them was still shocking news.

A man of God had come to Eli to declare that both his wicked sons were about to die on the same day (2:34), and that Eli’s line would be cut off from the priesthood. This prophecy came true of course (4:11). But before it came true, it was also revealed to Samuel. God’s revelation to Samuel was the same as that of the man of God who came to Eli, so Eli would not be in a positon to question Samuel’s words.

Shortly before Samuel was due to get up and open the doors of the house of the Lord, the Lord spoke to him saying that he had already told Eli that God would judge him and his family, and why. As we know, and as the people knew, and as the Lord knew, the two sons of Eli had ‘made themselves vile, and he did not restrain them’ (4:13). Furthermore, there was no possibility of atonement ‘by sacrifice or offering forever’ (3:14). Their sin were presumptuous, amounting to blasphemy against the Lord and his holy name. Presumptuous sin was punished by death under the Law of Moses (Deut 17:12); this presumption was not against the priest or judge, but by the priest himself, and doubly reprehensible. Judgment was about to begin, and it would begin in the house of God (1Peter 4:17).

**2. Samuel speaks to Eli**

Imagine a boy in his teens receiving such a message from the Lord, a message of judgment upon his *de facto* father, and priest in the house of God! Samuel did not get up and run to Eli when he got this message. He was, understandably, afraid to tell Eli the vision (3:15). He lay down until morning, when he got up and went about his duties as normal. But Eli felt Samuel was hiding something from him; Eli had told Samuel that it was probably the Lord calling him in the night. If Samuel felt bad about hiding the words of the Lord from Eli, he was soon put at ease by a threatening oath from Eli (3:17).

‘Then Samuel told him everything, and hid nothing from him’ (3:18). Sometimes the messenger is blamed for the message he delivers, but with Samuel it was more that he did not want to hurt Eli. However, prophetic words are to be spoken; the truth must be spoken in love (Eph 4:15). The man who failed to teach and restrain his own sons, resigned himself to the will of God, distressing and tragic as this was.

People get upset with their doctor when he does not tell them they have cancer. ‘I want the truth; I want to know everything’ they say. How strange that they do not want to hear the truth about their spiritual condition, or the truth about what happens after they die, namely judgment before almighty God. Besides, your doctor may well misdiagnose your cancer, but the Lord’s diagnosis of your spiritual condition is never mistaken.

The truth is very clear- after death comes the judgment (Heb 9:27). But there is good news, a truth that sits beside the truth of judgment, the truth that is Jesus Christ. Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me’ (John 14:6). There was no atonement for Eli and his sons, but there is for you, if and when you confess your sins and believe in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

**3. Samuel, a prophet of the Lord**

The words of judgment upon Eli and his sons give way to words of hope, words focussed on Samuel who, unlike Eli’s two sons, listened to, and believed, the words of God. ‘Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground’ (3:19). We read similar words about John the Baptist, the last OT prophet (Luke 1:80), and ultimately about Jesus, the prophets of prophets, who as a youth increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men (Luke 2:52). Ours sons may not be prophets like Samuel, but we can still pray that they will grow up into Christ, and that the Lord will be with them all their days. I hope you are demonstrating to them what such a blessed life is like!

‘The Lord let none of his words fall to the ground’ (3:19). Let us ponder these words as we draw this sermon to a close. The words we read in the newspaper end up in the bin because they have no lasting value. Sadly, many of the words we speak have no lasting value either, unless they are the words of God, words that we still read today in the Bible, words that are eternally relevant words of the eternal God.

Samuel the prophet spoke the words of God, words that we still read today because they are eternally relevant, even though they have already come true. Samuel’s words, as the words of God, never failed to come to pass, or never ‘fell to the ground’. The prophet Isaiah said of the words of God, ‘So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return void but it shall accomplish what I please’ (Isa 55:11). Why waste your time listening to words that fall to the ground at the end of the day? Much better to listen to words that are true, words that will never pass away, words that bring life if you listen and pay heed to them?

People in Israel listened to Samuel as they saw that none of his words fell to the ground. He was established as a prophet in Israel, from the city of Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south. Samuel continued to live in Shiloh where the Lord spoke to him, just as he spoke to Moses generations before. The word of the Lord was no longer rare in those days because the Lord had raised up a prophet who spoke his words to all Israel. Days of darkness had ended; the light of God’s word was again shining among his people. May the light of God’s word shine upon you and yours, and upon our nation today.

**God and magic**  Text: 1Samuel 4:1-11

Constantine was the first Roman Emperor to become a Christian. Pagan emperors persecuted the early church, with names like Nero and Diocletian being notorious. While fighting a rival emperor at Milvan Bridge, Rome, in AD 312, Constantine had a dream in which he was told to paint the mark of the cross, Chi-Rho or labarum, on the shields of his soldiers. After victory he wrote, ‘By this sign I have delivered your city!’ While Constantine made Christianity a legal religion throughout his empire, the method of his conversion did not bode well for the type of Christianity he promoted- a type of Christianity that is still promoted today. Constantine was not the first to mix magic with his belief in God, as we see from our Bible story today.

It was a very significant occasion in Israel when, still a youth, Samuel heard the voice of God. He was growing up in a day when the word of God was rare; not that religious practices were rare. People were still bringing their sacrifices to the house of God, but their worship was hollow, rather than hallowed, because the priests were corrupt to the core. The Lord told Samuel that he was going to judge these wicked priests and the whole house of Eli. As we come to chapter 4, Samuel drops out of the picture until chapter 7. The focus turns to Israel at war with the Philistines, or more significantly, the capture of the Ark of the Covenant. Our subheadings are, ‘Conflict with the Philistines’, ‘Capture of the ark’ and ‘Killing of Eli’s sons’.

**1. Conflict with the Philistines**

The Philistines or ‘sea-peoples’ originally came from Capthor or Crete (Jer 47:4). They settled along the coastal plain of what became known as Palestine, a name derived from this people group. They were there in the days of Abraham, and on into the time of the Judges- Samson famously got involved with the Philistines. They were a thorn in the side of Israel into the time of David, who famously killed a Philistine giant. The Philistines built five cities on this coastal plain, each with a local lord: Gaza, Gath, Ekron, Ashdod and Ashkelon.

To become a Roman emperor you had to go to war and win. It was probably the same with the Philistine lords. Even today, rulers feel the need to win a war in order to secure their position as national leader- just look at Putin! Having said this, we read that Israel went to battle against the Philistines (4:1); it is not clear who started this particular battle. The armies of Israel gathered at Ebenezer, and the Philistines gathered just a few kilometres away at Aphek (4:1). Israel had no king; they were led by tribal elders. Keep in mind that in those days victories were attributed to the gods of the victorious army. Armies would take images of their gods with them into battle.

When the two armies joined in battle, the Philistines came out on top; about four thousand Hebrews were killed (4:2). The Israelites were shattered by this defeat and loss of men. But note their response: ‘Why did the Lord being defeat upon us today before the Philistines?’ (4:3). What did I just say? If victory was attributed to their god, so this god was blamed for their defeat. Pagans saw things in such simple terms, and Israel had adopted this pagan thinking. No one asked if, perhaps, God was punishing them.

We have seen the terrible corruption of worship in Israel. Why should the Lord help them in battle when they were disobeying his commands? The God of Israel was not a God to be carried on men’s shoulders to do their bidding. There is a big difference between supernatural, in the sense that we do not see our God- although Jesus revealed him to us- and superstitious, in the sense that God is tied to holy objects, places or words. God is a living being who has spoken to us, and to whom we relate under a covenant that he has made with us.

**2. Capture of the ark**

After their terrible defeat at the hands of the Philistines, the elders decided to ‘bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who dwells between the cherubim’ from Shiloh to the battle field (4:3). They were defeated, they presumed, because God was not with them in a tangible way. They forgot that God is a spirit who inhabits eternity. They would bring God into their presence by bringing the ark into their presence, to save them from their enemies (4:3). With the ark in their camp, God would be forced to help them. I am reminded of Hindu students going to the market to get a huge idol of Sarasawati, the goddess of education. They set this up in their hostel, believing the goddess would help them in their exams.

The Israelites knew their God was powerful because with his help they, or their forefathers, had defeated the Egyptians, as well as the Canaanites. The Philistines knew this also (4:8). Knowing God is different to knowing about God. Thinking like their pagan neighbours, the Israelites just needed to ‘harness’ the power of their God for their political purposes.

The Ark of the Covenant was a box built by Moses according to instructions given to him by God or Yahweh. When God gave Moses the commandments written on stone tablets, these were placed in the box. The wooden box was covered with gold; it had a solid gold lid with cherubim moulded on each end. The box was placed inside the most holy place at the ‘heart’ of the tent of meeting, which was set up at Shiloh at this time. This cover of the ark was called the mercy seat, the place of God’s presence and the place where atonement for sin was made. ‘The ark pointed to Yahweh, the ruling, speaking and forgiving God’.

The two priests, Hophni and Phinehas, did not care about sins but they went along with this plan to ‘take God’ to the battle field. They were there with the ark when it was taken from Shiloh. The ark would never return to this place, and neither would they. Little did they know that ‘God’s presence’ or ‘God’s glory’ had already departed, because sin separates us from God (Isa 59:2).

‘When the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel shouted so loudly that the earth shook’ (4:5). Their shout was that of confidence in victory over the Philistines, not a shout of fear at the presence of almighty God- it was the Philistines who feared the presence of God. Maybe the Israelites were recalling the time when Joshua led their army in the defeat of Jericho. The Philistines recalled their God striking the Egyptians with plagues (4:8). Joshua was of course, doing what the Lord told him to do, but there is no word from the Lord here at Ebenezer.

The Philistines heard the great shout that erupted from the camp of the Hebrews and guessed that the ark of the Lord had come into their camp: ‘God has come into the camp!’ they said (4:6, 7). They were petrified, recalling the power of the gods that struck the Egyptians leading up to the Exodus. They assumed the Israelites had many gods, just like other nations.

Amazingly, the Philistines overcame this initial fear when the Israelites brought their gods into their camp. They rallied their troops, telling them to be strong and fight like men or they would become slaves to the Hebrews, rather than have the Hebrews as their slaves (4:9). Moreover, they had just defeated them decisively, killing four thousand of their soldiers. So the Philistines and the Israelites fought another battle, and the Israelites were again defeated, this time losing thirty thousand foot soldiers: ‘There was a very great slaughter’ (4:10). What a disaster!

Bringing the Ark of the Covenant into their camp made no difference to the outcome of the battle. Clearly their reasoning was faulty; they got their theology wrong. One commentator calls it ‘rabbit-foot theology’ because a rabbit’s foot is sometimes carried as a good-luck charm. It is theology based on superstition, not faith in a supernatural, sovereign God. This is theology that seeks to control God rather than submit to him. It is religious magic; it is trying to twist God’s arm instead of submitting to him.

Some time ago a fellow told me he kept bread and wine in his house and took communion whenever he wanted Jesus to help him. There are many who think they are saved by baptism and/or by taking the mass- they are taught this by the pope and the priests. Many carry crosses around their neck thinking, like Constantine, and like these Israelites, that God is somehow with them, and will give them success.

There are other Christians who are not superstitious as such, but who also engage in ‘arm-twisting’. Years ago a man’s daughter went missing- a very sad story as it turned out. This man turned to prayer, as we all did. He started praying day and night, and then started fasting. He was distraught no doubt, but seemed to be demanding God answer him because of this conduct. Sadly, some friends resorted to consulting a Hindu holy man on his behalf. You, like me, will have heard Christians being told to have more faith, to pray more, to fast more, to get everyone praying, and then God will heal their sickness. Sometimes we are told our prayers are not effective because we are not using the right words.

Of course the Lord wants to hear us praying to him, but he wants us to acknowledge him for who he is, not just for what he can give us; he is not Santa Claus! God cannot be kept in a match-box and brought out only when we need him, as a preacher once said. ‘Match-box theology’, ‘rabbit-foot theology’, ‘Santa Claus theology’, call it what you will, it is not biblical theology. The sovereign God will not be micro- managed by you or anyone. If you think you can hold God in your hand, how can he be holding you in his hand?

**3. Killing of Eli’s two sons**

The second battle against the Philistines, the battle in which the Israelites carried the Ark of the Covenant into battle, was more disastrous than the first. Did it mean that their God, Yahweh, was not as powerful as they thought? Of course not! It meant they had the symbol but not the thing or person symbolised- as we will later see. The loss of soldiers was almost eight times greater than in the first battle, but of greater concern was the capture of the ark of the covenant (4:11). In the eyes of God, it was all for the purpose of judging the two priests who mocked God and blasphemed his holy name as they broke one after another of his commandments while ministering in the house of God.

A man of God, as well as Samuel, both prophesied this judgment, saying that Hophni and Phinehas would both die on the same day (2:34). And this is exactly what happened on this day that the Philistines defeated Israel. In bringing the ark into the camp, they brought these two wicked priests into the camp, where the Philistines would kill them in fulfilment of the word of God. God will not be mocked. God will fulfil every word that he has spoken because he is powerful to do so.

God is sovereign. God is supernatural. God will not be manipulated or controlled by mere men. We must humble ourselves before him. Sure, we pray with confidence but not with demands. God is all powerful, but he decides when and how he will exercise his power. He has of course, done so supremely in the resurrection of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. If you are saved, born again in Jesus Christ, remember this is another evidence of God’s sovereign power. In his grace, He may choose to heal or help you when you pray, but do keep everything in perspective, God’s perspective.

**Eli and Ichabod**  Text: 1Samuel 4:12-22

I have no introductory story for this sermon because I found none more dramatic and despairing as the one we have read here in 1Samuel 4. We read of four people dying: Eli’s two wicked sons, Eli himself, and Eli’s daughter-in-law. We read of a child being born but given the odd name ‘Ichabod’ because, ‘the glory has departed from Israel’. On top of all this the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of God’s presence among his people, was captured by the enemy.

Could things get any worse in Israel? What was going on in the land, and where was God in all this? Was he the all-powerful, covenant God they had been told about? The Israelites were left asking such questions. Have you ever been left asking such questions because the Lord has apparently failed to help you? ‘We all prayed, believing, but she still died. What’s wrong?’ We now look at this passage under three subheadings: ‘Eli dies’, ‘Ichabod is born’ and, ‘God working out his purposes’.

**1. Eli dies**

The Israelites were fighting the Philistines and losing. Someone had the bright idea of bringing the Ark of the Covenant, which symbolised the presence of almighty God, onto the battle field. ‘The enemies have brought their idols, so why not us?’ When the ark was brought, the two priest-sons of Eli came with it. The Lord was not pleased to be dragged around the country, and certainly not by two wicked priests. They were going through the motions of worship but God was no longer listening; his glory had already departed from between the cherubim (Ps 80:1, 99:1).

The Lord had already made known his intention to kill both of Eli’s sons on the same day (2:34), and this is what happened when the Philistines attacked Israel. These two priests were killed, but more than this, the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines. Israel was defeated and fled into the hills. One ‘man of Benjamin’ tore his clothes and put dust on his head, as a mark of grief, as he ran back to Shiloh with news of the disaster (4:12). The ark had been taken from the tent of meeting in Shiloh. Eli the priest was sitting by the gate, fearful at what was happening to the ark snatched from the holy place; he wasn’t able to stop his wicked sons (4:13).

The man of Benjamin ran into the city telling the tragic news. A great cry went up from the city, a cry not of victory but a cry of horror and grief. Eli heard the commotion and asked what was going on. He was ninety eight years old, blind and obese. He could not move from his chair, but he was still the leader of the nation. The man soon came and told Eli the tragic news. Israel had suffered a great slaughter at the hands of the Philistines, his two sons were dead, and the ark of God had been captured (4:17). Eli knew of God’s declaration that Hophni and Phinehas would both die on the same day (2:34), but the capture of the ark of God came as a complete shock. Such was the shock that Eli fell off his chair, broke his neck and died (4:18). He would be the last man in his family to reach old age, according to the word of the Lord (2:32). Eli had judged Israel forty years.

With Eli and his two sons dead, who would judge the nation? Moreover, who would offer up the sacrifices when there was no priest? With the Ark of the Covenant gone, would sacrifices continue to be made in Shiloh? So many questions for the bereaved and decimated nation of Israel. Who had the answers? Before we answer this question about answers, the story of Israel’s losses and grief continues, with a focus on the person of Eli’s daughter-in-law giving birth to a son.

**2. Ichabod is born**

I have not met anyone called Ichabod, and don’t expect to do so, although we did come across some interesting names in parts of India. We had a friend called Ben Hur, and heard of a student called Hitler Singh! We support a young missionary lady called Shekinah, a word which refers to the glory of the Lord present in his temple (Exod 40:34). The name ‘Ichabod’ refers to the exact opposite, to the absence or exile of God’s glory from his temple, specifically from his dwelling place between the cherubim on the atonement cover of the ark of God.

The wife of Phinehas was pregnant and due to deliver when she heard the news of the capture of the ark, the death of Eli, and the death of her husband (4:19). There is no indication which piece of news upset her the most - all were tragic- but she seems to have understood what the capture of the ark meant for the nation. Besides, she knew of her husband’s wicked ways so divine judgment upon him was not unexpected. Whichever news was most shocking, the effect was that she went into labour and gave birth to a son. The birth was itself tragic because the mother died in childbirth, despite hearing that she had given birth to a son, which is normally good news (4:20).

As her son was taking his first breath in this world, and she was taking her last, the wife of Phinehas named her son. She did not name him after his father or grandfather. She named him in memory of the ark of God that had just been captured by the enemy. She said, ‘The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured’ (4:22) - the fifth time we hear these words in this passage. The name ‘Ichabod’ means ‘without glory’; ‘*kabod*’ is Hebrew for ‘glory, honour, or weight’. Unknown to this newborn, his birth and his name marked the Lord’s departure from Israel, from the midst of his own covenant people.

Refusing to honour the Lord their God, they despised him (2:30). When there is no repentance, the ‘lightly esteemed’ of this verse ends up being divine judgment. Sin cuts us off from God, and when God goes, so does the light; and when there is no light there is darkness and death, just like that which came over this mother and her people. There were of course, thousands of widows in Israel after thirty thousand men were killed by the Philistines (4:10).

**3. God working out his purposes**

‘Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub where it had been, to the threshold of the temple’ (Ezek 9:3). Ezekiel was not speaking of the temple at Shiloh but years later of the temple in Jerusalem- at the same time as the prophet Jeremiah. The wicked king of that time had led the people into apostasy and they refused to listen to God’s prophet and repent. In the end, the Lord sent a foreign nation to take them into exile and destroy the city, including the temple. The people thought this would never happen; that God would fail to protect them, or that he would allow his magnificent temple to be destroyed. But as Ezekiel said, the glory of God had already departed. The temple became just another huge, ornate building. Many huge, ornate buildings called churches adorn cities across Europe, and even in our cities, but the question arises as to whether the Lord can be found in these buildings. Are the words of God heard in these buildings called churches, or only the words of men?

So was Yahweh powerless in the face of Philistine aggression? This begs the question, was he ever present in the camp of the Israelites? The Israelites believed that they had brought their God into their camp, so their defeat meant their God was not all-powerful. But their theology was screwed up, as the dying mother of Ichabod demonstrates. It was not that God was unable to overpower the Philistines; his willingness to do so is another question because he willed to judge Eli’s sons. The truth is, as Davis writes, quoting Ellison, ‘The glory of God had indeed departed, but not because the ark of God had been captured; the ark had been captured because the glory of God had already departed’.

Apart from the mother of Ichabod, Eli himself knew that God was judging his two sons because the man of God, and also Samuel, told him. When Samuel told him, Eli resigned himself to the declared will of God (3:18). But the capture of the ark, the focus of this chapter and the next two, came as a surprise to him. He was Israel’s judge as well as priest, but had no word of explanation or comfort for the people.

What had become of Yahweh, Israel’s God? His glory had departed from his dwelling place in the temple. The ark of God was just a box, an ornate box, now in the hands of the Philistines. It is interesting, as we will discover, and as the Philistines discovered, that God was still concerned for this box which contained the stone tablets on which he wrote his covenant commands. The Philistines thought their gods were more powerful than Yahweh, but would soon learn otherwise. They ended up showing more fear and respect for this symbolic presence of God than the Israelites had. But Yahweh had cleansed his house of wicked priests and corrupt shepherds who failed to honour him.

Ezekiel heard the Lord tell the man dressed in linen to go through the city killing all without a mark on their forehead, beginning with the elders in the house of God (Ezek 9:4-7). This reminds us not only of what happened here with Eli and his family, but also of what the apostle Peter writes: ‘For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God’ (1Peter 4:17). Judgment will begin in the house of God but will not end there. One commentator concludes, “Could ‘Ichabod’ be justly written over many of our church sanctuaries?”

We, as readers of this tragic story, know that it is one of divine judgement - Eli knew this, as did Samuel, but he is not in the picture at this time. We know, as Eli also knew, that the Lord had already chosen a faithful priest and prophet to replace Eli and his sons in the young man, Samuel. It seemed to many that Yahweh had been defeated by the Philistines or their gods. But God will not be mocked or blasphemed by his enemies, be they pagans or people in his own house. God will judge the wicked whoever they are. His people might continue to give lip service in worship of almighty God or his son Jesus Christ, but God looks on the heart.

So let us examine out hearts today, especially as we come to partake of the sacrament given to us by Jesus Christ himself. ‘If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved’ (Rom 10:9).

**The Ark of God among the Philistines**  Text: 1Samuel 5

On 21st September 1995 I was riding my motor bike into the city of Allahabad but had to turn back because of a crowd blocking the street. People were flocking to a temple which housed the elephant god, Ganesh. I later heard that a rumour was spreading like wildfire from city to city across the country. It was reported that the Ganesh idol was drinking milk offered to it. Thousands upon thousands were rushing to offer milk to this idol. It is reported that milk sales in Delhi jumped 30% in a day.

I recall that the government asked for this phenomenon, this apparent miracle, to be investigated. Top scientists did so, and concluded that it was simply a matter of surface tension drawing milk from teaspoons, which evaporated as it ran down the, often white marble, idol; idols made of other materials were not obliging worshippers! For me it was astounding that so many people, even highly educated people, actually believed this lump of stone was drinking milk.

It was some years before this time that a Hindu lady heard the gospel and believed in Jesus as her saviour and Lord. Her Ganesh idol was not drinking milk because she had thrown it out of her house, along with all other idols of the different gods she once worshipped.

In Israel at the time Samuel was born, people were going through the motions of worship but living to please themselves. The priests were breaking one commandment after another. But God, who had not spoken for a long time, spoke through a man of God, and through Samuel, declaring that he was going to kill the two wicked priests. When the Ark of the Covenant was carried to the battle field as a good-luck charm, the priests were with it, and were killed by the Philistines.

The Philistines captured the ark, rejoicing that their gods defeated the God of Israel symbolised in the Ark of the Covenant. They were initially fearful of the ark, while the Israelites initially rejoiced in having the ark of God in their camp. There was little difference in thinking between the pagan Philistines and the people of God with regard to their god or gods. But when the ark was captured the tables were turned. The Israelites were distraught; old Eli fell off his chair and died. The Philistines on the other hand, went home thinking their gods were more powerful than Yahweh.

Chapter 5 tells us what happened when they put the ark of God in the temple of Dagon. The story is dramatic and somewhat amusing to us today, but the events that followed were deadly serious for the Philistines. The hand of the Lord was heavy upon those who took custody of the ark of God. Our subheadings are simply, ‘Hands of Dagon broken’ and, ‘Heavy hand of the Lord’.

**1. Hands of Dagon broken**

Having defeated the Israelites and captured their God, the Philistines took the ark of God back to their city, Ashdod. This was the northernmost of the five Philistine cities and the city closest to the battle site at Aphek. They put this golden box, 1.1 x 0.7 x 0.7m in size beside the huge idol of Dagon in their temple. Dagon seems to have been made in the form of a man. The word ‘Dagon’ means ‘grain’; it is thought that this was a fertility god related to Baal. The Philistines probably adopted this god when they settled in Canaan. The ark of God was set in a humbling position before the mighty and victorious god, Dagon.

When the people of Ashdod went to worship their god early the next morning, they found Dagon flat on his face before the ark of God (5:4). Their god had taken a tumble and needed help to get back on his feet, so the people gave Dagon a helping hand! We are reminded of the words of Isaiah 44 about men cutting down a tree and using one half to make a carved image or idol and burning the other half in the fire. Idols were also made of gold and silver, but the idol of Dagon was probably made of clay and richly decorated.

Isaiah’s mockery extends to pointing out that these idols need to be carried about. The Hebrews carried the ark of course, but as this story shows us, God is well able to look after himself. He is all-sufficient and sovereign; he does not ‘need’ us, despite what some Christians and their hymns teach. God wants us to worship and obey him, and he calls us to serve him, but ‘he owns the cattle on a thousand hills’ (Ps 50:10), and as we see from this story, he is able to defend and exalt himself without our help.

The Philistines set their god back on its feet bedside the ark of God. But when they came to worship the next morning, Dagon had again fallen on his face before the ark of the Lord. He had fallen across the threshold of the temple and was now without a head or hands- not a glorious site. His head was no use anyway because, as the Psalmist says, he could not see, hear, or speak anyway, let alone give counsel (Ps 115). Moreover, the hands that man gave this idol were also useless; Dagon could not even get himself back on his feet!

We are not told of the Philistines setting Dagon back on his feet a second time; most probably they left their idol lying there because they now regarded the threshold on which it fell as somehow holy (cf. Zeph 1:9). Pagans are not averse to bowing down to relics they have found. Sadly the pope and his priests do the same. Calvin once mocked the pope saying that he could make a number of crosses from all the bits of wood they venerated as being from the actual cross of Christ.

**2. Heavy hand of the Lord**

‘The hand of the Lord was heavy upon the people of Ashdod’ and its surrounds (5:6). Not only was the God of Israel causing havoc in the temple, he was bringing disaster to the people, striking their bodies with painful and deadly tumours. Because the Septuagint mentions rats springing up, and because the Philistines later made gold rats by way of a guilt offering, it is thought this disaster was bubonic plague, or ‘black death’, as it was known in seventeenth century England.

The narrator tells us that the heavy hand of the Lord was behind this epidemic in Ashdod and surrounds (5:6). Moreover, the people themselves recognised the heavy hand of the Lord behind the epidemic of tumours decimating their community (5:7). How did they come to this recognition? They had no Scriptures, no word of God to turn to. They had no prophets of the Lord to consult. Why did they not conclude that it was just a coincidence that their idol kept falling down, and that deadly tumours broke out on their bodies?

What would happen if a deadly disease broke out and started killing people in our community? Would anyone conclude that God’s hand was heavy upon us? Would anyone start thinking like the Philistines, thinking of some way to get God to lift his heavy hand and maybe even make atonement with this God? We are jumping ahead, but as we said before, we believe in the supernatural while not being superstitious. Many believe in a supreme being but fail to see him as a living being, as the powerful creator and ruler of this world and all its nations.

In Hebrew the word for ‘heavy’ or ‘weighty’ is ‘*kabed*’. Objects can be heavy but so can actions and even words. I find reading legal documents ‘heavy going’. Moreover, we refer to people high up and powerful in an organisation as being the ‘heavies’ of the organisation. There is a related word in Hebrew, the word *‘kabod*’, which means ‘glory’. Glory has the sense of being ‘weighty or ‘heavy’. Recall that the glory of God had departed from Israel with the loss of the ark (4:21). That glory or ‘*kabod*’ has returned to the ark of God with his heavy, ‘*kabed*’, hand now being felt by the Philistines.

God’s glory is a very heavy and profound reality. We do not see Him in all his glory today but we will one day. We do however see a reflection of his glory when his heavy hand is revealed. Wise people will recognise the heavy hand of the Lord upon them and do something to remove it.

The people of Ashdod concluded, ‘the ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us’ (5:7). They called an urgent meeting of all five Philistine leaders to express their concerns: ‘What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel’ (5:8). The decision was made to carry the ark to the nearby city of Gath, about 20kms inland from Ashdod. If nothing happened to the people of Gath then the ark of God was not to blame for the disasters in Ashdod. However, their fears were realised and, ‘The hand of the Lord was against the city [of Gath] with a very great destruction’ (5:9). Bubonic plague broke out in Gath and surrounds. Wisely, the elders of Gath acted quickly to send the ark to the next nearest Philistine city, that of Ekron, about 10kms to the north.

As the ark of God was carried into their city the people of Ekron cried out, ‘Why are you bringing that ‘god’ into our city to kill us?’ The God of Israel whom they had defeated on the battlefield was not acting like a defeated God. The Philistines were rapidly reviewing their theology. This God that they had captured was toppling their gods and afflicting their people with sickness. This god was breaking all their rules; he was not doing what people said. Moreover, it was difficult to ignore this god. They could have pressed on, watching people die all around them, but they realised how the disease and the death were linked to the symbolic presence of the God of Israel, and to the heavy hand of God upon them (5:11).

The Philistines called another national summit. As a nation we did the same thing when a viral pandemic hit our nation; we formed a national cabinet. The Philistine leaders came to the decision that the ark of the God of Israel must be returned to where it belonged, ‘so that it does not kill us and our people’ (5:11).

This was wise thinking on the part of these pagans. Even wiser thinking would have been to abandon Dagon, and all their other gods, and start worshipping the God of Israel because he was clearly the more powerful God. But instead of calling for a Hebrew priest to tell them how to worship the all-powerful God of Israel, they decided to send the ark of God back. Needless to say, it would have been difficult in those days to find a priest in Israel who knew how to worship God.

Sadly, I did not hear of our national cabinet acknowledging God in any way during our pandemic. We ourselves continued crying out to the Lord for him to lift his heavy hand from upon us, and to bring revival in our midst. But we also ask how many in the church today are able to tell a pagan population the gospel of Jesus Christ, and how to worship the true and living God. Are you able and ready to do this?

**Send the ark back!**  Text: 1Samuel 6:1-12

When a Hindu lady believed in Jesus Christ as her saviour and Lord, she threw all idols out of her home. Most Hindus have a place in their home for ‘puja’ or worship; they have an idol of their favourite god on a shelf with a candle or light in front. They will garland this idol when they worship. This is why I hate seeing garlanded pictures in Christian homes. By all means, remember those who have died, but do not worship them!

One day this converted lady came to me one with some ‘holy beads’ that were given to her by a Hindu holy man during a huge Hindu festival. He was selling such beads but gave these to this Christian lady. Christian friends were as disturbed as she was at seeing these ‘holy beads’. What was to be done with them? I knew I had to get rid of them, so flushed them down the toilet! Nothing bad happened to me of course, because such gods are nothing (1Cor 8:4). But the ark of God was a symbol of the true and living God, the God ‘of whom are all things and through whom are all things’ (1Cor 8:6). Its holiness was real, not imagined.

The story of ‘the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts who dwells between the cherubim’ (4:4), began in chapter 4 with the Hebrews taking the ark from the house of God at Shiloh to the battlefield- like some good-luck charm! To their surprise and dismay, the Philistines beat them and captured the ark. This battle trophy proved to be deadly, destroying their god Dagon and bringing a terrible disease upon the people. They proved this by moving the ark from city to city and observing the outcome. ‘The ark brought deadly destruction… because the hand of God was very heavy there’ (5:11).

At a national cabinet it was decided to send the ark of God back to where it came from as a matter of urgency; people were dying and cries were going up to heaven (5:12). But how was the ark to be sent back. This God was angry with them already; they dared not make him angrier. If thousands perished for merely looking into the ark (6:19), imagine what would have happened if anyone tried to smash it to pieces.

The ark had been in the land seven months before the Philistines decided to send it back to Israel (6:1). They called a meeting of experts, which in those days meant religious leaders rather than scientists and politicians, as we do today. The advice of these religious leaders, priests and diviners, proved to be wise- unlike that of our experts most of the time. Science experts in Germany closed down all coal-fired power stations to become dependent on Russian gas, and look at their predicament today!

We will look at the advice of the Philistine priests and diviners under four subheadings: make a sin offering, make a new cart, milking cows, and movement of the cart monitored.

**1. Make a sin offering**

Gods get upset when they are offended, just as people do. Pagans know this, which is why they appease their gods with offerings. If something bad happens it is because you have offended a god, so you must appease this god- it is not always easy to know the particular god you have offended! Since the God of Israel, symbolized in the ark of God, was angry with them, as evidenced by the deadly epidemic, they had to appease God is some way. This was the first piece of advice given by the priests. The ark must not be sent away empty, they said, but must be returned with a sin or trespass or guilt offering (6:3). Only in this way could the Lord’s heavy hand of judgment be removed from them.

There is no indication of a priest from Israel being among these religious advisors, but the God of Israel had ordained that his people confess their sin and bring an offering to the house of God; this was to be a female goat or lamb (Lev 5:6). When the Philistines asked what they should bring as a trespass offering, the religious leaders told them to make and bring five gold tumours and five gold rats (6:4). ‘Five’ because there were five lords of the Philistines, and gold because no expense was to be spared in making this offering. But tumours and rats! They saw that rats were ravaging the land (6:5) and must have linked their presence to the tumours breaking out on the people. But they were not so blind as to simply advise getting rid of the rats because the rats only came when the ark of God came. Pagans today seem ‘blinder’ than they were in the days of Samuel.

Not knowing the requirement for atonement to be blood sacrifices for sin, the Philistine advisors suggested that the guilt offering should reflect their sin in some way. Confession of sin means turning away from sin and making restitution as appropriate. If you have stolen something you must return it. The Philistines were returning the ark of God that they had taken, and seeking to appease God for doing so with these costly images of the afflictions they had suffered at the hand of God (6:5). So it was that five gold tumours and five gold rats were made and put into a chest beside the ark of God. Along with these they were to give glory to the God of Israel (6:5).

The Philistines, or their religious leaders at least, were not entirely ignorant of the ways of the God of Israel, as their proposal to make a sin offering shows. They had learnt from history of the great battle between Pharaoh and Moses down in Egypt. They warned the Philistines against going down the same path, the path of hardening one’s heart in defiance of Yahweh, the God of Israel (6:6).

The plague that was striking the Philistines reminded them of the plagues with which Yahweh struck the Egyptians. The whole world knew the story of the Exodus, and wise men did not want to see it repeated. The proverb, ‘history forgotten is history repeated’ is true. We could add that merely rewriting history is not going to stop it being repeated. The Egyptians were probably taught a different history of the Exodus to that written in the Bible, but wisely, the Philistines listened to historical truth rather than lies.

**2. Make a new cart**

‘Now therefore make a new cart’- so the advice of the religious leaders continued (6:7). ‘A new cart’ we might say, ‘Why not an old cart?’ This cart, it was hoped, would carry the troublesome god back to where it belonged. This cart would never be seen again, so why not send an old one? These pagans new better than many Christians today who think that God should be pleased with the left-overs of their life, including their time. A new cart means bringing the first fruits of our income and our time.

In this matter, the Israelites also have something to teach us. When the new cart reached Israel, the people of the town split the wood of the cart and offered the prize cows as a burnt offering to the Lord (6:14). Nothing was too good or too costly to be offered to the Lord!

**3. Milking cows**

These pagan priests came up with an amazing final test to see if the ark of God was the indisputable cause of their troubles. You will be aware of Gideon and the way he tested the Lord with a fleece (Judg 6:36-40). God was merciful, and also sufficient, for Gideon’s test- Gideon was wary of making God angry. The Philistines had concluded that God was angry with them but wanted conclusive proof. The test they were setting was a natural impossibility- but with God all things are possible!

The new cart with the ark of God set upon it and the gold tumours and rats in a chest beside it (6:8), needed two animals to pull it. Normally oxen would be used. If oxen were yoked to the cart and set on their way they might go anywhere, even towards Israel. These wise men decided to use milking cows, cows that had calved only recently. I can still hear from my childhood, the mooing or lowing of cows separated from their calves- they could go on all day! I also remember walking the paddocks going ‘baa, baa’ like a calf trying to get a cow to lead me to her calf. Our text does not tell of the calves crying out for their mothers, but it does tell of the cows ‘lowing as they went’ (6:12).

The Philistines did as their religious leaders advised and yoked two milking cows to the new cart on which the ark of God had been placed. With the calves locked in a pen, they sent the cows off. No one was leading them, so how would they know to head for the land of Israel. Besides, with their calves locked up it was most unlikely they would go anywhere. The Philistines sat down to see what happened.

**4. Movement of the cart monitored**

The advisors simply said, ‘And watch’, which is what they did (6:9). The test was that if the cows took the cart towards the closest Israelite town of Beth Shemesh they would know for sure that Yahweh had brought the great disaster upon them; if the cows did not take the cart away then the disaster was pure chance.

Most people today opt for the ‘pure chance’ explanation, being unwilling to put God to the test. The apostle Paul actually says, ‘Although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God, nor were they thankful, but became futile in their thoughts and their foolish hearts were darkened’ (Rom 1:21). I truly hope these words do not apply to you! Not even the Philistines were so foolish.

What did the watchers see? ‘The cows headed straight for the road towards Beth Shemesh… lowing as they went’ (6:12). They were acting against all natural instincts. This was a miracle of animal behaviour. That the cows ‘did not turn aside to the right or the left’ adds to the miracle because the cows were milk cows that had never been yoked (6:7). Both cows were under divine compulsion to pull the cart towards Israelite territory.

I don’t know how sceptics and liberals try to explain away this miracle, but as always, Scripture has an answer for every argument brought by sceptics. The lords of the Philistines were themselves sceptical of this test set by their religious leaders. The closing words of this story confirm that it was indeed a miracle. ‘The lords of the Philistines went after them [the cows] to the border of Beth Shemesh’ (6:12). The people watched as the cows set off on the road to Beth Shemesh, but the lords or rulers wanted to be convinced beyond all reasonable doubt. So they followed the cows and the cart carrying the ark of Yahweh all the way to the border. They watched and said ‘good riddance’ to this ‘idol’ they had taken from Israel some seven months before.

To the Philistines knowledge of Yahweh’s dealing with Pharaoh and the Egyptians was added this personal experience of the heavy hand of God. Thankfully, they listened to their religious leaders and sent Yahweh out of their land before he totally destroyed them. But they were not ‘converted’ as we might say. They learnt that Yahweh is the most powerful God of all but, like the people referred to by the apostle Paul, although they knew God to be sovereign Lord of all they refused to accept him as their God. They went back it seems, to their superstitious ways, being careful not to tread on the threshold of the temple of Dagon.

**Sanctity of Yahweh**  Text: 1Samuel 6:13-7:2

When Jesus stepped into the country of the Gadarenes he was confronted by a naked and violent demon-possessed man (Mark 5:1-20). Jesus felt sorry for this man, and proceeded to cast the demon or demons out of the man and into pigs. The man put on clothes and started behaving normally. Was everyone happy to see this poor man healed? No! The people pleaded with Jesus to leave their region.

The ark of God was not welcome among the Philistines because their idols were falling down before it, and the people were being afflicted with tumours. They saw Yahweh as a more powerful God but feared him and sent him away; they sent the ark back to Israel. The manner in which they sent the ark back proved their fear to be well-founded. Two milking cows, separated from their calves, pulled the newly made cart carrying the ark of God to the border town of Beth Shemesh. The ark of God was back in Israelite territory but were all Israelites happy? Why did the men of Beth Shemesh say, ‘Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God? And to whom shall it go up from us?’ (6:20).

Our subheadings today are: ‘Levites take the ark of God back’, ‘Looked into the ark’, and, ‘A long time at Kirjath Jearim’.

**1. Levites take the ark of God back**

We have seen the fear that came upon the Philistines after they captured ‘the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who dwells between the cherubim’ (4:4). This fear was well-founded of course. But what was the attitude of Israelites towards the ark being back in their land? Did they fear the ark of God as the Philistines did? Did they fear the ark at all?

The Israelites had taken the ark from the most holy place in the tent of meeting at Shiloh to the battlefield, as if it was some good luck charm. Eli’s sons showed no fear of the Lord whatsoever, and they were the spiritual leaders of Israel. Yahweh was accorded no sanctity in Israel; he was just like the man-made gods of the pagans. What would the Israelites do with the ark of God now that it was back with them after seven months? The Philistines had probably destroyed Shiloh, the place where the ark of God was previously housed.

The initial reception of the ark was sanctified; the people of Beth Shemesh treated the ark of God as holy, remembering that it symbolised the presence of God. The people of Beth Shemesh were out harvesting their wheat crop when they saw the ark coming towards their town. They rejoiced at seeing it (6:13). The cows pulling the cart stopped by a large stone in the field of a man called Joshua. This was a Levite town so it was Levites who took the ark of the Lord down from the cart and put it on the large stone, along with the chest of gold tumours and rats (6:15). The wood of the ark was split and the cows sacrificed as a burnt offering to the Lord. It seems other burnt offering and sacrifices were made by the men of Beth Shemesh. They must have recalled making burnt offerings to the Lord when the ark was at Shiloh.

At least the actions of these men demonstrated a fear of God. If we fear God we will obey his commands. Jesus said, ‘If anyone loves me he will keep my commands’ (John 14:23); the love of God that Jesus speaks of is much the same as the fear of God that we read of in the Bible. If you love someone you will respect them and not think that you can control them and make them do your bidding. The Lord demands respect, and indeed reverence, as the King of kings and Lord of lords (2:30).

The narrator reminds us of the five lords of the Philistines who watched the ark of God depart their city of Ekron to be carted all the way to city of Beth Shemesh in Israelite territory (6:16-17). They saw the chest with the gold tumours and rats that they sent with the ark as a sin offering, taken by the men of Beth Shemesh, so presumed their offering was accepted by Yahweh. But we hear no more of this offering of the Philistines. The focus continues to be upon the ark of the Lord, now resting upon the rock platform known as Abel in Joshua’s field near the town of Beth Shemesh.

**2. Looked into the ark**

When the ark of the Lord was returned to the Israelites, to the town of Beth Shemesh, the people of this town treated the ark with the fear and reverence expected. Moses had made this ‘box’ according to directions given to him by the Lord on the mountain. When it was set up inside the tent of meeting, ‘The glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle’ (Exod 40:34). It was set up in the most holy place, and only the high priest could enter this place, and that only once a year, and not without blood (Heb 9:7). The burnt offerings of the people of Beth Shemesh were in keeping with the law, and the holiness of the ark.

Was it the same men or another group who later came and desecrated the ark of the Lord by touching it? Verse 19 comes as a shock to the reader, although we have just seen the heavy hand of the Lord upon the Philistines for thinking Yahweh was like their god Dagon, which they had to set back on its feet. Out of fear, they sent the ark of God away. Now that the ark was with the Israelites who knew about its holiness or sanctity because their covenant God ‘dwells between the cherubim’ (4:4, Ps 80:1). They had grown up going to worship at Shiloh, where the ark of God was housed within the house of God. But the incident now reported shows how little they knew about their own God, the God they were supposedly worshipping. How much do you know about the God whom you have come to worship?

The men of Beth Shemesh looked into the ark of the Lord, and God struck them; he struck them dead (6:19). This verse contains some textual problems, especially with regard to the number of people struck, but the biggest problem for Christians today is understanding the action of almighty God. Actually, the adjective ‘almighty’ is rarely heard with reference to God today. We refer to God as ‘Our Father’, and rightly so, but the Bible tells us to fear our father. Over-emphasis on the love of God, or misunderstanding of the love of God, has led to a misunderstanding of the nature of our relationship with the Lord God.

There is an over familiarity with God, whom some call ‘Daddy’, and in the expression, ‘There is nothing God and I cannot do together’. We can know God and even be intimate with him but not familiar with him, and certainly not disrespectful; children being allowed to disrespect their human father does not help when it comes to teaching respect and reverence for almighty God. ‘Those who honour me I will honour’ says the Lord (2:30). Let us learn the lesson of these verses.

Looking at these verses more closely, we ask why the men of Beth Shemesh looked into the ark of the Lord. Actually, some scholars think they simply gazed at the ark, but it is more likely that they lifted the lid to see what was inside. Why would they do such a thing? Were they checking to see if the stone tablets were still there, or was it just irreverent curiosity? We are not told why, but it does not really matter. If they had read their Scriptures they would have read that no one was to touch ‘this holy thing lest they die’ (Numb 4:15). They seemed to know that only Levites were to carry the ark, and that with two poles (6:15), but then they went and looked inside this holy object. You may recall what happened when Uzzah reached out to steady the ark as David was transporting it to Jerusalem some twenty years later (2Sam 6:6-7). God was holy when Moses made the ark, he was holy when the men of Beth Shemesh looked inside the ark, he was holy when Uzzah touched the ark, and he is still holy today.

Those who looked into the ark were struck by the Lord with a ‘great blow’ (6:19 ESV). The people lamented because of this heavy blow. But the number of fifty thousand and seventy men seems excessive, and is not entirely clear from the Hebrew; a few manuscripts do not have the fifty thousand. For even seventy to be struck dead would have been a heavy blow in this small town.

We are reminded of the heavy hand of the Lord upon the Philistines for treating the ark of God like one of their idols. The men of Beth Shemesh were showing even less fear and reverence towards the ark than the Philistines, when they should have known better. God is not impartial in his judgment. In fact, judgment begins in the house of God (1Peter 4:17). We must ask if reverence for the holiness of God is as it should be in the church today. Do we even hear about the fear of God? Do we take sin as seriously as we should? Do we attend to the means of grace, including the ‘holy sacraments’ with the devotion due to almighty God? Do we read this book called the Holy Bible with reverence and awe? Davis concludes, ‘Too late we may learn that Israel’s jealous God is not indifferent about our indifference. Might judgment even fall on us for the same reason?’

**3. Long time at Kirjath Jearim**

How did the people of Beth Shemesh respond to the Lord’s heavy blow upon them? How would you have reacted? They were at least as smart as the Philistines in realizing that the deaths in their community were the judgment of Yahweh. Most people today are not even this smart; someone may die in every other house across the city but no one says, ‘The heavy hand of the Lord is upon us’. Instead they talk about ‘bad luck’, or, more commonly, blame the government for not stopping the disaster from happening?

The men of Beth Shemesh said, ‘Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God’ (6:20). They knew God to be holy; they knew him as Yahweh, whose mighty hand had delivered their forefathers out of Egypt. They knew what Moses had said about Yahweh dwelling between the cherubim. Was it not time to repent before the Lord of hosts, before almighty God, and plead for mercy?

The men of Beth Shemesh were like the Gadarenes, who asked Jesus to leave their region after he healed a demon-possessed man (Mark 5:17). They said, ‘To whom will the ark go up from here?’ (6:20 NIV). They saw the power of almighty God but refused to humble themselves before him. When the apostle Peter saw the power of Jesus he also said, ‘Depart from me’, but added, ‘for I am a sinful man’ (Luke 5:8). To be holy means to be separate; because of our sin we are separated from the holy God. The Philistines understood this- remember their sin offering- and the men of Beth Shemesh also, but they failed to humbly plead for mercy. Peter was not by nature a humble man, but he did confess his sin, and later confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God.

The men of Beth Shemesh sent messengers to Kirjath Jearim, an Israelite town some 15km towards the northeast, on the border of Benjamin and Judah (6:21). The people of this town obliged; they came and took the ark of the Lord, bringing it to the house of Abinadab. Abinadab ‘consecrated Eleazar his son to keep the ark of the Lord’ (7:1). The ark would remain in Abinadab’s house a long time (7:2), until David came and took it to Jerusalem by way of the house of Obed-Edom (2Sam 6:4).

When the ark was in the house of Obed-Edom, the Lord blessed his house (2Sam 6:12), so presumably the Lord blessed the house of Abinadab also- and presumably the people of Beth Shemesh did not receive the blessings they might have if they had repented before the Lord and worshipped him with reverence and godly fear, because God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:28,29).

**Renewing of the covenant**  Text: 1Samuel 7:2-6

There have been a number of revivals in the recent history of the church. The Wesley brothers, along with George Whitfield, saw a revival in England in the mid 1700’s. There was a Welsh revival a bit later. By ‘revival’ we mean a mighty work of the Spirit of God accompanying the preaching of the word. Revivals occur within a corrupt society and church. They are marked by confession of sin that is sincere and often public, prior to a whole-hearted return to the Lord. So it is that we pray for revival tody because we live in a society that is corrupt, and where Christians lack commitment to the Lord. The angel’s words to the church at Laodicea come to mind: ‘You are luke-warm, neither hot nor cold’ (Rev 3:16).

We don’t read of revivals in the OT but we do read of covenant renewals, and of the people of Israel returning to the Lord. Chapter 7 of 1Samuel is a case in point. Corruption of worship in the land resulted in judgment from almighty God. God’s judgment is never pleasant at the time; the key to God’s judgment is our response. The people of Israel suffered defeat at the hands of the Philistines, with the ark of the Lord being captured and their priest-leaders being killed. The ark was returned, but there was no revival and no returning to the Lord until twenty years later, as we see here in this chapter. The Lord’s blessing was confined to the household looking after the ark of the Lord. The rest of the people kept on living and worshipping like the pagan nations around them.

We pick up the story of the nation established by Yahweh, with Samuel returning to the narrative. We have not heard of Samuel for three chapters, not since he was established as a prophet of the Lord in all Israel (3:20). Presumably, he was prophesying during this time but no one was listening. When the Philistines attacked Israel, the elders had the ark of the Lord brought to the battlefield, hoping for better luck and victory in their fight against the Philistines. But they were defeated; Eli’s daughter-in-law summed up the resulting situation in the nation in the name Ichabod- ‘the glory has departed from Israel’ (4:21).

This situation continued for twenty years until self-pity and pagan worship in Israel gave way to them, ‘lamenting after the Lord’ (7:2). We might ask how much longer it will be before we see self-pity and pagan worship in our land give way to mourning and seeking after the Lord. We have just two major subheadings today: ‘All Israel lamented after the Lord’ and, ‘Assembly at Mizpah’.

**1. All Israel lamented after the Lord**

Samuel’s prophecy concerning Eli and his sons came true. The Lord established Samuel as a prophet in Israel. Presumably, he prophesied during the dark years of Philistine oppression, and with the ark of God being looked after by Abinadab at Kirjath Jearim; and presumably the people did not listen! We now learn that they were listening to pagan priests and crying out to foreign gods and Ashtoreths (7:3). Baal and Ashtoreth’s were the male and female gods of the Canaanites.

When Joshua brought the people into the land of Canaan they were told to destroy the gods of the land. But these gods kept popping up again and again. These were attractive gods, attractive in the sense of appealing to the lust of the eyes and of the flesh. They were fertility gods, whose worship was related to good harvests and fertile flocks. Worship of such gods involved ritual prostitution; pagan feasts were orgies of food and sex. One preacher comments that, chapel and brothel were conveniently at one location.

Back in my younger days, Hinduism and Hindu gurus became popular in the West. Young people were leaving the church and the vacuum in their lives was being filled by pagan religions. Hindu worship, like all pagan worship, is very sensual; drugs and sex heighten the ‘enlightenment’ obtained at worship ceremonies. This was the big attraction for the children of the sexual revolution in the West. The influence of these gurus has largely died with their deaths, but corruption of worship through sexual immorality continues, even in the church.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus spoke of the seed that fell among thorns being like people who hear the word and start out well, but the cares, riches, and pleasures of the world choke the life out of such people. John writes of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life being ‘of the world’ and not compatible with love for God (1John 2:16). The life of the people in Israel in Samuel’s day was being choked by their lusts, to the extent that they eventually ‘lamented after the Lord’.

The life of many a Christian today is similarly being choked by their love for the world. It is not easy to turn away from such lusts, from such temptations, but until we do so, until we are brought to tears and brought to our knees in repentance before the Lord, we cannot call ourselves a follower of Christ. Remember the rich young ruler who loved Jesus, but when told to sell all that he had he went away sad. ‘One thing you lack’ said Jesus (Luke 18:22). What is the one thing keeping you from following Jesus whole-heartedly? It may not be something sinful in itself- riches are not sinful, nor is sex, and nor is family. These things are sinful when we put them before Christ. Are you able to put Christ before everything else in your life- everything else?

Repentance, as in turning away from the ‘loves’ or the ‘other gods’ in your life, is not easy. But Samuel told the people of Israel they must put away the Baals and Ashtoreths, and serve the Lord only. He said they must, ‘Return to the Lord with all your heart’ (7:3). I have referred to whole-hearted repentance and sincere repentance because our repentance is not always sincere. God is not fooled by a few tears, or even a lot of tears. ‘Could my tears forever flow, all could never sin erase’ wrote Augustus Toplady in the hymn, ‘Rock of Ages’.

I have seen people weeping as they confess their love for Christ, but seen little evidence of such love after their eloquent outburst. Repentance must be followed by a life commitment, a total commitment to Christ, and indeed of ongoing repentance, if it is genuine or sincere repentance. Remember, the Lord looks on the heart. And remember that he is a jealous God when it comes to your worship. ‘You shall have no other God before me’ is the first commandment.

Yahweh demands exclusive worship, unlike other gods. Hindus worship many gods and some think they can add Jesus to their collection of gods. When true Christians refuse to worship other gods, Hindus get upset. Our society is much the same; when we refuse to accept other religions as being true, or refuse to accept sinful conduct as okay, we are accused of being intolerant, and become targets of abuse. Tragically, many Christians have succumbed to this abuse, to this pressure from society or family, and no longer worship Jesus as he demands. Listen to what Jesus says about worshipping him: ‘He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he who does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me’ (Mat 10:37).

**2. Assembly at Mizpah**

When the people came to Samuel ‘lamenting after the Lord’ he told them to put away the foreign gods from their midst, and the people did so (7:3, 4). He told them to return to the Lord whole-heartedly, and they did so. Foreign gods were thrown out and they refused to love anything more than God. Repentance takes place in the heart of course, but it must also be tangible or must be seen. How would the people in Israel demonstrate the sincerity of their repentance? Presumably, putting way their idols meant burning or otherwise destroying them (7:4). Have you put away the thing or things that keep you from total commitment to the Lord?

Samuel called for further evidence of repentance and commitment from the people of Israel. He told them to gather at Mizpah where he would pray to the Lord for them (7:5). Gathering for worship is the most fundamental demonstration of sincere repentance and commitment to the Lord. If you truly love the Lord, you will love to be with the Lord’s people worshipping the Lord. Gathering for worship does not make you a Christian of course, but failing to gather with God’s people raises questions about the sincerity of your repentance and commitment to the Lord. If you have something more important to do than gather for worship, is not that thing more important to you than the Lord?

Samuel told the people to gather, ‘and I will pray to the Lord for you’ (7:5). This looks like a prerequisite, a necessary condition for him to pray for them. Samuel wasn’t taking phone calls as they sat in their homes, or called in from a party, a football match, or from doing the shopping! He told them to gather at Mizpah, and they did. Mizpah was a hill just north of Jerusalem; Mizpah means ‘watchtower’. It was an obvious place to gather, a central place and a place close to Ramah, Samuel’s home.

Samuel said he would pray to the Lord for the people. It would appear that they were being harassed by the Philistines, and maybe their crops were being destroyed, despite worship of Baal. Whatever it was, they had come to their senses and asked Samuel to intercede for them before the Lord. He first told them to repent or ‘return to the Lord with all your hearts’, and then to gather at Mizpah.

The first thing Samuel did at this assembly was draw water and pour it out before the Lord (7:6). What was this all about? It is hard to know. After drawing water it is usual to drink it, not pour it out on the ground. Pouring water out to the Lord may have symbolised repentance, the pouring out of one’s heart before the Lord. We pour out water in baptism as symbol of washing from sin.

The people went on to fast as they gathered at Mizpah. They fasted and prayed, ‘We have sinned against the Lord’ (7:6). All sin is against God and must be confessed before God. We saw that revivals in the church were similarly accompanied by public confession of sin. Fasting is still valid in as much as it focusses the body and mind on prayer; fasting and prayer go together. There is a time for feasting and also a time for fasting and prayer. Here in verse 6 we do not read that Samuel prayed, but when he told them to gather at Mizpah he said, ‘I will pray to the Lord for you’ (7:5). The people needed someone to intercede for them before the Lord, and this person was Samuel.

Samuel was a prophet, a man through whom the Lord spoke to his people. ‘And Samuel judged the children of Israel at Mizpah’ (7:6). As judge, he not only heard cases and gave decisions from the Lord, but was leader of the nation. Samuel was also priest, offering sacrifices to the Lord and interceding before the Lord on behalf of God’s people.

As prophet, priest and king, Samuel was a type of Christ. Our one and only prophet, priest and king under the new covenant is our Lord Jesus Christ. ‘There is only one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus’ (1Tim 2:5). Do you call upon this mediator when you pray? You have no access to the throne of God apart from Jesus Christ, our prophet, priest and king.

**Ebenezer- saved with God’s help**  Text: 1Samuel 7:7-17

The renewal of the covenant that took place in Israel was like a revival in the church. We spoke previously about revivals in recent church history, noting that these were marked by sincere and widespread repentance, and public confession of sin. Some Christians are so eager to see a revival in the church today that they try to manufacture one. But we cannot do this; all we can do is pray and keep on faithfully preaching the gospel. Are we in the church today doing this, praying and preaching the gospel?

When Samuel was born, the Lord had not spoken to his people for a long time; they were not listening to the Lord anyway. Then the Lord spoke to Samuel, and established him as a prophet in Israel. But it seems the people did not listen to him either. When the Philistines attacked, Israel was defeated (4:2). The elders of Israel sought the Lord’s help, not by prayer but by ‘manufacturing’ his presence among them. They used to ark of the Lord like the Philistines used their idols. But the holy God of Israel would not be manipulated. Far from helping them, the Ark of the Covenant was captured and the Israelites were soundly defeated. They would spend the next two decades ignorantly worshipping idols, and being oppressed by the Philistines.

These years of darkness led to their ‘lament after the Lord’ (7:2). They came to Samuel the prophet, who told them to repent of their sin, their sin of idolatry, and ‘return to the Lord with all your heart’ (7:3). They threw out their idols and gathered at Mizpah to confess: ‘We have sinned against the Lord’ (7:6). Samuel must have rejoiced to see and hear such confession! Were these the same people that he saw going to their shrines to engage in debauched pagan worship? Revival in the church will be amazing; it will not go unnoticed!

The gathering of the children of Israel at Mizpah was noticed by the Philistines. Being pagans, they did not understand that this was a purely spiritual gathering, a gathering for confession and renewal of the covenant between Yahweh and his people. The Philistines thought the Israelites were gathering to launch an attack upon them. They responded by sending their forces to quell yet another uprising in Israel. But things had changed in Israel; the Lord had changed the hearts of the people. They still feared the Philistines but they feared the Lord more. Fear led to prayer, instead of fighting in their own strength with idols in tow. Our subheadings are: ‘Earnest prayer’, Ear-splitting thunder’, ‘Ebenezer’, and ‘Israel judged by Samuel’.

**1. Earnest prayer**

When the children of Israel heard that the Philistines were preparing their forces for invasion, they did not run for their weapons or for their idols, but asked Samuel to pray for them (7:8). They believed that the Lord their God could save them from the Philistines. Sincere repentance and confession of sin was followed by faith in ‘the Lord our God’. They believed that God ‘may save us from the hand of the Philistines’. They were no longer telling God what he must do but were asking God to help them.

The people knew God had the power to save them, and they were depending on Him alone at this stage; they would fight when he told them to fight. They also knew that through Samuel they could ask God to help them. They recognised the need for a mediator. Understanding our sin, and the holiness of God, makes a big difference to how we approach God. We have an even better mediator than Moses or Samuel because Jesus ‘ever lives to intercede for us’ (Heb 7:25). In Jesus we have a mediator who sits beside God the Father on the throne in heaven (Rom 8:34). How blessed you are if you know Jesus as your mediator, the only mediator between God and men (1Tim 2:5).

‘Do not stop crying out to the Lord our God for us’ the people said to Samuel as they heard the Philistines rattling their swords (7:8). Samuel responded by offering a suckling lamb as a burnt offering to the Lord (7:9). The high priest, when there was one, could only enter the most holy place once a year, and not without blood (Heb 9:7). Samuel the prophet was also Samuel the priest. He sacrificed an animal according to the Law of Moses in preparation for prayer (Lev 22:27). Remember that, ‘Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness’ (Heb 9:22), and without forgiveness of sin there is no entering into God’s presence with our prayers. Remember this, and remember the blood of Jesus Christ every time you pray; this is why we pray ‘in Jesus name’.

**2. Ear-splitting thunder**

After sacrificing a lamb as an offering to the Lord, ‘Samuel cried out to the Lord for Israel’, as the people asked he to do (7:9). His earnest prayer was that the Lord deliver Israel from the Philistines. We are not actually told the content of his prayer but this was what the people asked him to pray, and this is what we see in the Lord’s answer to his prayer. In fact, ‘The Philistines drew near to battle against Israel’ even as Samuel sacrificed the lamb and prayed (7:10). Anxiety and fear must have gripped the hearts of the Israelites as they watched Samuel offer up the lamb and pray to the ‘Lord our God’.

We recall another time of covenant renewal, the time when Elijah gathered the people of Israel on Mt Carmel (1Kings 18). After seeing the prophets of Baal fail with their sacrifice, the people watched Elijah repair the altar of the Lord, sacrifice a bull on this altar, and then pray to the Lord. As they watched they saw the Lord answer Elijah’s prayer with fire, fire that burned up the sacrifice, as well as the altar and the water that Elijah had poured on everything.

Two hundred years before Elijah, the children of Israel watched Samuel sacrifice a lamb and pray to the Lord. They kept watching as the Lord answered Samuel’s prayer. They saw, or rather heard, the Lord send thunder upon the Philistines, loud, ear-splitting thunder. This crashing thunder, and flashing lightning no doubt, caused panic and confusion within the Philistine camp (7:10). The details are brief but the outcome was amazing. The Philistines probably saw the hand of Israel’s God behind the storm and high-tailed it for home. They knew what it was like to offend Israel’s God, unlike our secular society.

Even Christians think nothing of offending God. Even Christians fail to see the hand of the Lord behind things happening in the world today, or behind things happening in their own life. We fail to understand that God is not only powerful to bless, but also powerful to discipline or judge. Moses spoke of blessings on obedience and curses on disobedience. A blessing was defeat of enemies and a curse being defeated by enemies (Deut 28:7, 33). Hannah, in her divinely inspired prayer said, ‘The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken in pieces; from heaven He will thunder against them. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth’ (2:10). Did Samuel hear and remember the words of his mother’s prayer? Are the words of Hannah’s prayer heard and understood by us today? Are not the disasters or catastrophes seen in the world today reminders that the end is near, and that today is the day of salvation?

**3. Ebenezer**

Thunder sent by the Lord made the Philistines flee in fear. The Israelites, who were gathered for worship at Mizpah, gave chase, striking them down all the way to below Beth Car (7:12). The number of causalities is not given, but it seems the Israelites defeated the Philistines without losing a man. What a contrast to their earlier battles when they depended on themselves rather than the Lord (cf. 4:2, 10). ‘Below Beth car’ was probably Philistine territory.

Samuel wanted the people to remember this day, the day the Lord answered his prayer and defeated the Philistines by his outstretched hand. He wanted all glory to go to the Lord for ever. While this stone no longer exists, as far as we know, the story of the Ebenezer stone is here in the Bible, and its lesson remains for us and our children.

Ebenezer means, ‘stone of help’, stone of God’s help. Just as Joshua set up a pile stones after crossing the Jordan River with God’s help, so Samuel set up this stone after God defeated the Philistines (Josh 4). Samuel declared, ‘Thus far the Lord has helped us’ (7:12). He and the people had learned that God is powerful to save, and willing to save, when his people ‘return to the Lord with all your hearts’ (7:3).

‘Thus far’ points back as well as forwards. As Christians, we look back to all the Lord has done for us, even in previous generations. We are here today because of God’s help, and especially because of his grace and power shown to us in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. Sometimes we get down, and even doubtful, about God’s help, but your very presence in God’s house today is testimony to God’s help. Some Christians talk about ‘raising my Ebenezer’ as they acknowledge the Lord’s help thus far in their lives. In terms of stones and memorials, we need nothing more than what the Lord has given us in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. This is our Ebenezer stone.

‘Thus far’ also points forward. ‘We stand in the present but dwell on the past in order that we can be steadfast for the future’. Samuel did not know the future but he knew the Lord who does not change, and who remained powerful to help his people into the future. When we take the Lord’s Supper we ‘proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes’ (1Cor 11:26). As believers, we live with a sure and certain hope, the hope of the resurrection, and the Lord’s return in glory on the clouds of heaven. The Lord does not change and his promises do not change.

Are you remembering the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and remembering his promises regarding the future? Our future is just as certain as our past as far as the Lord is concerned. So why do we fear the future like people who do not believe in Jesus, and have no hope beyond this world?

**4. Israel judged by Samuel**

‘And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life’ (7:15). We come to the conclusion of the early part of Samuel’s life; in the next chapter we find him an old man (8:1). After setting up the Ebenezer stone, the Philistines stopped harassing Israel because, ‘The hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel’ (7:13); maybe the Ebenezer stone stood as a witness to the Philistines also? Towns they had taken from Israel during the dark years were restored to Israel, and there was ‘peace between Israel and the Amorites’ (7:14). The Philistines are not normally listed among the Canaanites, but the Amorites are. Both were enemies of Israel, so maybe ‘Amorite’ is used is a very general sense in this verse.

Being judge of Israel meant more than ‘merely deciding on legal disputes, but of reproof, instruction and counsel for living under Yahweh’s lordship’. Samuel was God’s appointed leader for the nation. When the people called for a king, it was not only Samuel they were rejecting but the Lord (8:7). As judge of Israel, Samuel travelled on a circuit from Bethel to Gilgal and to Mizpah each year, hearing cases and bringing judgments from the Lord. No doubt he taught and explained the Scriptures whenever he visited these places. He always returned to his home in Ramah, where he built an altar to the Lord.

But there is no mention of the rebuilding of the tent of meeting that was at Shiloh, or of Samuel bringing the Ark of the Covenant from the house of Abinadab in Kirjath Jearim. It was as if they had taken a step back to the days of Abraham and Isaac. Moses had brought further revelation from the Lord with the building of the ark and the tabernacle, but it seems they were not ready for this revelation. When the Lord further reveals himself, it is to build upon and fulfil what he has already revealed, so let us not forget the basics of God’s holiness, God’s power, and God’s grace, even as we worship him under the new covenant declared by our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Demand to be like others**  Text: 1Samuel 8

In 2008 Barak Obama was elected president of the United States. Wikipedia tells us that, ‘He was the first African American president, the first multiracial president, and the first non-white president’. The non-white community rejoiced when Obama was elected. They hoped and believed that he would bring racial discrimination to an end. But what do we see today? Obama was challenged by a woman in the Primaries. Many women are still waiting for a female president to solve all their problems. The have a female African American vice-president, who will presumably solve the problems of women and non- white Americans one day!

We are being asked to elect political leaders in our country. Do we expect them to solve all our problems? Many do, as they cry out for more money, which they believe will solve all their problems. How duped many are as politicians go around promising money, money which they got from us in taxes! Others want laws changed so they can pursue their own life choices, and restrict the choices of others.

The nation of Israel was formed when the Lord brought them out of Egypt. Moses was their God-appointed leader: ‘The Lord spoke to Moses face to face as a man speaks to a friend’ (Exod 33:11), and Moses obeyed the voice of the Lord. The Lord established a covenant with the people of Israel, and ruled over his people through a person appointed by the Lord, in what we call a theocracy. Neither monarchy, rule by a king, or democracy, rule by the people, necessarily exclude theocracy, but they generally do. In this chapter we see the elders of Israel demanding a king. They had reasons for making this demand, legitimate reasons like Samuel’s rebellious sons, but was this their true motive for wanting a king? The Lord saw the people’s demand as rejection of his reign over them. When Samuel reminded them of the downsides of having a king, they refused to obey his voice.

**1. Rebellious sons**

‘Samuel was old’ we read as we come to chapter 8 of 1Samuel. This book began with the birth of Samuel. As a boy, the Lord spoke to him and he was established as a prophet in Israel. But the decline of the nation continued, until the Ark of the Covenant was captured, and Eli the priest and his two sons died. Samuel reappears and leads the people in a time of covenant renewal. His prayer on their behalf is answered when the Lord, through a thunderstorm, scattered the Philistines, and brought peace to Israel.

Samuel went on to judge Israel, but apparently failed to judge or discipline his own sons. It is amazing that, having seen and indeed prophesied against Eli and his wicked sons (3:13), amazing that Samuel should similarly fail to restrain his sons. Sadly, it is not unusual for ministers of the gospel to neglect their own family as they focus on the family of God. Even while counselling other parents about their children, some fail to see what is happening in their own family. Remember what Jesus said about seeing the speck in your brother’s eye and failing to see and consider the log in your own eye (Mat 7:3). One commentator writes of this chapter being a mirror that reveals ‘Israel and you’. The whole Bible is a mirror revealing our own hearts to us. We would be wise to examine our hearts, our motivations, and our conduct, in the light of God’s word, before others, and eventually the Lord, do this for us.

Samuel had two sons, Joel and Abijah, whom he made judges and posted in Beersheba (8:2). Previous judges were chosen and empowered by the Lord to deliver his people; ‘judgeship’ was not hereditary. It is interesting that after Gideon delivered them they wanted to make him king, but he refused saying, ‘The Lord shall rule over you’ (Judg 8:23). Samuel’s action in appointing his sons judges is not condemned in the text but their conduct certainly is. We, and he, might have thought that being posted in this southern border town would mean, ‘out of sight, out of mind’, but this was not the case.

The elders took note that Samuel’s sons did not walk in the ways of their father. They ‘turned aside after dishonest gain, took bribes and perverted justice’ (8:3). While Eli’s sons were adulterous gluttons, Samuel’s sons lusted after riches, paying no regard to the means by which they accumulated their riches. The gods worshipped by Eli’s sons were their body and their belly, while the god worshipped by Samuel’s sons was money. One or both of these gods are still popular today, but I pray are not gods you worship! Bribery is condemned under the law because it blinds the eye to justice- just look at its effect in almost every society today (Deut 16:19). The elders of Israel were rightly concerned about the character and conduct of Samuel’s sons. But whole this gave them a pretext for asking for a king, it was not their only motivation.

**2. Rejection of Yahweh**

The elders of Israel came to Ramah to talk with Samuel. They reminded him that he was getting old and that his sons were corrupt (8:5). Samuel was not pleased to be told these truths. Their concern was who would lead Israel into the future, particularly when surrounding nations came against them; the Ammonites may have been threatening at this time (11:1). But there was another reason for asking for a king; they wanted a king so as to be ‘like all the nations’ (8:5). This king would not only ‘judge us’ but would ‘go out before us and fight our battles’ (8:20).

Samuel took their request for a king personally; what they asked ‘displeased’ him (8:6). In asking for a king, they were rejecting Samuel as their leader. Samuel had judged Israel from his youth, from the time the Lord made him a prophet. He was a good judge; remember the previous chapter in which he prayed as requested and the Lord delivered the people. That may have been years before, but we must not forget the blessings we have received from the Lord: ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits’ (Ps 103:2). Above all, let us not forget that, ‘While we were still sinners Christ died for us’ (Rom 5:8).

Samuel was hurt by the request of the elders but he did not turn upon them with harsh words. He turned to the Lord in prayer (8:6). How did the Lord answer Samuels’ prayer?

Firstly, the Lord told Samuel to give them what they wanted (8:7). It is interesting that Moses spoke of this very time, a time when the people would ask for a king in order to be like all the nations around them, and commanded, ‘You shall surely set a king over you whom the Lord your God chooses’ (Deut 17:14-15). Moses further commanded what this king should and should not do. What he should do was read the Book of the Law, and obey God’s law, all the days of his life.

Rule by a human king, or monarchy, was not incompatible with divine rule, or theocracy. While ever the king acknowledged God as Lord and King, his throne would be blessed, but if he turned away from the Lord and began ruling in his own right, or ruling like kings of other nations, God’s blessing would be withdrawn.

Secondly, the Lord told Samuel that the people were not rejecting him as their leader but rejecting the Lord himself (8:7). They had been a rebellious people ever since the Lord saved them from slavery in Egypt. The people of Israel were rebels, just like Samuel’s sons, ‘who did not walk in the ways of their father’; so there was a measure of hypocrisy in their criticism of Samuel’s sons. The children of Israel did not like the Lord reigning over them. They wanted to have a king like other nations, a king they could see, a king with a real sword to lead them into battles. Ultimately, this king would be a man who would do their bidding, so they thought.

This call for a king was not unlike their desire to have idols. It was to be like other nations, to have a king and a god in their image whom they could control. Having an unseen, and in many ways unknown God ruling over them was not acceptable to people who wanted to be in control of everything in their lives- nothing much has changed in human hearts since Samuel’s day has it? To have the Lord as their King required humility and faith. Do you find it easy to be humble and have faith? Do you not do everything possible to help yourself before calling on the Lord? Do you really believe the words you sing in Psalm 118:8: ‘It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man’? Do you believe Jesus when he says, ‘You cannot serve God and mammon’ (Mat 6:24). Do you accept the lordship of Christ in your life?

**3. Reminder**

‘Now therefore, heed their voice’ and give them a king (8:9); but warn them what life will be like under a king. The people of Russia and China do not need to be told these things. Not so long ago it was only kings of small African nations who were despots! Samuel told the people what the king they so desperately wanted would do to them, not for them. Kings are better at taking than they are at giving. Any human king will have a sinful, selfish heart, unlike the sinless and compassionate God.

When Moses spoke of Israel adopting a monarchy, he effectively warned them of this king accumulating horses, wives, and riches for himself (Deut 17:16-17). Samuel gives a similar warning. The king they wanted to reign over them would take their sons to fight in his army, and to work in his fields, and his factories. He would take their daughters to work as maids in his palace. He would also take their servants and donkeys to do his work. And the king would do what kings and governments do best, namely tax the people to support their lavish lifestyle. The king will take ‘a tenth of your grain’ and ‘a tenth of your sheep’. And if you do not pay, he will take the best of your fields and orchards. He might take them anyway if he wants them- remember Naboth and his vineyard.

The warnings Samuel gave were from the Lord. They were solemn warnings. The Lord knew they would end up crying to the Lord because the king they chose was oppressing them, but the Lord would not listen in that day (8:18).

It is not unusual for the Lord to give us what we want, after warning us that this thing will bring us heartbreak or disaster. Israel in the desert cried out for meat, which the Lord gave them and they got sick (Numb 11:23): ‘And He gave them their request, but sent leanness to their souls’ (Ps 106:15). I know a man who is in love with another man’s wife; clearly it is not God’s will for him to marry her but he will not listen. Christians fall in love with non-Christians, whom the Bible warns against marrying, but they go ahead anyway, often with disastrous results. Samuel listened to the people of Israel when they asked for a king, but will they listen to him now that he has warned them of the consequences of having ‘a king like all the nations’?

**4. Refusal to listen**

One commentator refers to these closing verses as ‘our immunity to wisdom’. The people were determined to have a king like other nations. If they heard what their aging prophet said they were not ready to change their ways. They knew what was best and they would have it: ‘No, but we will have a king over us’ (8:19). They had to be like everyone else. They had to focus on their own strength and their own weapons like everyone else. They were afraid to be different. So the Lord told Samuel to make them a king (8:22).

Are you immune to wisdom? Our society is, so if you are intent on being like other people you will be. The cry of the experts in our society is for education. If only children were better educated they would be better people. While education is important, remember what you get when you educate a thief- a smarter thief! Knowledge is necessary, but it is not the same as wisdom. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Ps 111:10). Fear of the Lord comes from faith in the Lord, which is what the people of Israel lacked. What about you?

**Divine providence**  Text: 1Samuel 9

On Monday I had an appointment with the dentist and with the doctor. These were at the same time as my wife took two grandchildren to swimming lessons. Then we realised that we had only one car because someone had borrowed our second car. As we considered the logistical difficulties and began to pray, a text message came from the mother of the grandchildren saying she did not need us to take them to swimming lessons. We saw this as a case of divine providence, of the Lord working things out for our good.

My grandmother told of a much more significant case of divine providence. She had three sons in the war for whom she prayed daily. She told me that her eldest son, Tom, was supposed to board a troop ship but somehow missed out- and that ship was later sunk. He was later captured by the Japanese, but all three sons, one being my dad, came home. I am sure you have seen God’s hand of providence in your life. God knows the future, and the Bible says that he works all things together for good to those who love God (Rom 8:28). In his providence, God provides for us and works things together for our good, even if these things seem hard for us at the time.

God’s special people had demanded the prophet and judge, Samuel, make them a king like other nations. Samuel saw this as their rejection of him as their leader, but the Lord said they were actually rejecting him as their sovereign (8:7). Still, the Lord told Samuel to go ahead and make them a king; he told all the men of Israel to go off to their home towns (8:22).

Israel was made up of twelve tribes, each given a region in which to live by Joshua, except for the tribe of Levi. Samuel was a Levite living in the region of Ephraim. Previous judges had come from different tribes. Who would Samuel make king over Israel? Would tribal rivalry erupt? The king would be chosen by the Lord and anointed by Samuel his prophet. God’s choosing of Saul comes about in an interesting story about lost donkeys, a story of divine providence. We also find the Lord speaking in the ear of Samuel, and finally read of Samuel meeting Saul, the donkey-keeper from Benjamin, and anointing him.

**1. Lost donkeys**

Saul is introduced in the first two verses of chapter 9. Firstly, his family background is given. Kish, his father, was from the tribe of Benjamin, the youngest of Jacob’s sons. This tribe was allocated a small strip of land in the hill country between Judah and Ephraim. This small tribe was almost wiped out in a civil war with the rest of Israel (Judg 20). Kish however, was not a poor man; he was ‘a mighty man of wealth’ (9:1 ESV). He was a landlord, and wealthy warrior, so it seems. He kept donkeys, the key to transportation in those days; mules are still used for transportation in the Himalayan Mountains. He probably kept sheep also, but Saul was in charge of the donkeys; Saul’s successor, David, was a shepherd who looked after his father’s sheep.

Saul was more handsome, and a head taller, than anyone else in Israel (9:2). He was a kingly type indeed- but not quite a Goliath! When Kish’s donkeys wandered off, he told is son Saul to take a servant with him to find the lost donkeys. In itself this is hardly a newsworthy story, but read on; this is just the beginning of a momentous change in the history of Israel. The Lord was using lost donkeys to bring Saul into contact with Samuel the prophet.

Saul went off with the servant through the mountains of Ephraim and other places in the region of Benjamin, but failed to find the donkeys. They ended up exhausted and out of food in the ‘land of Zuph’, which ‘happened’ to be the name of Samuel’s great, great, great, grandfather (1:1). The town they came to was probably the town of Ramah, Samuel’s home town. Saul wanted to give up and return home after three days of searching. His servant had another idea. Somehow he knew that this was the town where ‘a man of God’ resided. He knew that this man was an honourable man whose words always came true (9:6). He thought this man of God might know where the lost donkeys were.

We know that man of God to be Samuel the prophet or ‘seer’; the seer could ‘see’ into things that others could not see because he was empowered by God to do so (9:9). In his providence, the Lord had brought this handsome, kingly type to the town of Samuel. But Saul had no gift for the seer, no prophet’s fee, so asking for his help to find the donkeys was out of the question (9:7). But the servant ‘happened’ to find a quarter of a shekel of silver in his pocket. When I say ‘happened’ I have this word in inverted commas because things do not ‘just happen’ in God’s world. As we learn from the Shorter Catechism, ‘God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass’. ‘God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing all is creatures and all their actions’ (Shorter Catechism Q. 7 and 11).

Saul agreed with his servant that they go and visit the man of God now that they had something to give to him for his services. So off they went up the hill to this town where Samuel lived. But was Samuel home? He travelled about judging Israel (7:16). As they went up, they met some young women coming out to draw water late in the afternoon, as was their custom. Saul and his servant asked them if the seer was home. ‘Yes’ they answered. Saul had come that very day to officiate at a ‘sacrifice of the people in the high place’ (9:12). The women told Saul and his servant to hurry if they wanted to meet Samuel before he went up to the high place for the sacrifice and feast. And sure enough, as they entered the town they met Samuel coming towards them, on his way to the high place (9:14).

Some might call these events a ‘coincidence’, but this word, like the word ‘happen’, does not appear in the account; these words are not in God’s vocabulary. If you were reading this story in the newspaper it would be littered with these words: ‘happened’, ‘by chance’, or ‘by coincidence’, but we do not find these words as we read the story in the Bible.

**2. The Lord speaks to Samuel**

Thus far we have not been told of the providence of God, of God orchestrating these events leading up to the meeting of Samuel and Saul. But in verse 15 we are told how the Lord had spoken to Samuel, ‘in his ear’, in preparation for this moment. The Lord revealed to Samuel the details of his providential working of all things. ‘Tomorrow about this time I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him commander/prince over my people Israel’ (9:16).

Samuel believed the word of the Lord and was on the lookout for this ‘man of Benjamin’. We are not told how long it was since the Lord had told to him ‘make them a king’, but Samuel was obviously waiting upon the Lord, and not ‘jumping the gun’, as Saul would later do to his peril (1Sam 13). Waiting upon the Lord to answer our prayer is not easy, but impatiently ‘going it alone’ will prove disastrous in the end.

The Lord had heard the cry of his people and mercifully decided to give them a king, even though their cry indicated rejection of the Lord as their sovereign. He last heard such a cry when they were slaves in Egypt, and he sent the prophet Moses to deliver them. But as we read in the Bible, they went on to rebel against Moses and against the Lord (8:8). Yet God persisted with them, listening to the intercession of Moses at times. And so he persisted with his people when they asked for a king. The Lord would graciously give them Saul to, ‘save my people from the hand of the Philistines’ (9:16).

Samuel was on the lookout, listening to the voice of the Lord, and ready to do God’s will. This was life for Samuel, and I trust, life for you- ‘listening every moment to the Spirit’s call’, as the old hymn says. So when Samuel saw Saul, he heard the Lord say to him, ‘There he is, the man of whom I spoke to you. This one shall reign over My people’ (9:17).

**3. Samuel meets Saul**

The story reaches an ironic climax with Saul asking Samuel the way to the seer’s house, and Samuel telling him, ‘I am the seer’, and ‘you are going to eat with me today’ (9:18,19). Saul was focussed on finding his donkeys while Samuel was focussed on finding the man who would be king - what a story! Here is the Lord working in men’s lives to bring about his purposes, as we learn from the Shorter Catechism. Like me, you may sometimes reflect on how the Lord brought you and your spouse together in marriage, or brought you into the job you have, or into this fellowship. The Lord is working in your heart by his Spirit, and also working in the day to day events and interactions in your life (cf. Ps 121, 139).

Samuel knew Saul was God’s choice for the first ‘ruler’ of Israel- he is not yet calling him king (9:16). But Saul was, as we say, clueless; Samuel would have to deal gently with him. He told Saul to go up the high place, where Samuel would eat with him and tell him ‘all that is in your heart’ (9:19). It is not clear what Samuel meant. He tells Saul that his donkeys had been found but he seems to do this immediately. Telling Saul that ‘the desire of Israel’ was upon him sounded strange in the ears of Saul. Like Gideon, he was dismissive, saying he was from the smallest family of the smallest tribe (9:21, Judg 6:15). Why was Samuel speaking to Saul like this?

Samuel proceeded to take Saul and his servant into the gathering of some thirty people, and have them sit with him at the head table. It was usual for the thigh portion of the sacrificed animal to be given to the priest as the person of honour (Lev 7:33), but on this occasion Samuel instructed the cook to set it apart to be given to Saul. ‘So Saul ate with Samuel that day’ (9:24). He sat in the place of honour and ate the portion of the sacrifice reserved for the Lord’s special person.

Samuel brought Saul and his servant from the high place to his house in the town. He spoke with Saul on the roof of his house, where they probably slept the night. He may have been revealing to Saul what was in his heart (9:19), on the basis that the Lord was already working in Saul’s heart, preparing him for his divine calling.

At dawn the next day, Samuel woke Saul so he could send him on his way. But before sending him off, he wanted to speak to Saul in private. At the outskirts of the town, Samuel asked for the servant to be sent on ahead while he announced to Saul the word of God (9:27). By now Saul would have realised that it would be foolish to resist the Lord’s call. He realised the solemnity of the Lord’s calling, with no thought of taking power or glory to himself at this time. He would soon be the Lord’s anointed.

**Signs for Saul**  Text: 1Samuel 10:1-16

Who will be the next person to sit on the throne of England? It is not a secret. Prince Charles has been waiting for over seventy years. Who will be the next Prime Minister of Australia? This is no great secret either; we have men who have been active in politics for years, so the man just elected is no great surprise. But it would be a surprise if a young factory worker was chosen from a crowd watching football and proclaimed our next Prime Minister! The King of the Jews that we know was born in a stable and grew up in a working class home in the backwaters of Galilee. He was not chosen by men but sent by God to deliver the people.

A man from an insignificant family in the smallest tribe of Israel was out looking for lost donkeys when he ‘happened’ to meet the prophet of God. It was not a chance meeting of course, but a meeting orchestrated by the Lord; a matter of divine providence. God was working to make Saul king ever since the people demanded a king, and even before; God has foreordained all things since the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4, Shorter Catechism Q 7).

Samuel was not pleased to hear the people’s demand for a king, but he obeyed the voice of the Lord when told to anoint a man from the land of Benjamin leader of Israel, that man being a keeper of donkeys called Saul (9:16,17). But there were some difficulties involved in anointing Saul as king, the first king of Israel. The first of these was Saul himself- how would he react to being anointed king? The second was the people- would they accept Saul as their king? The first half of chapter 10 focusses on the first question of convincing Saul that he was the Lord’s anointed. He believed Samuel to be a prophet of God. He listened to what Samuel said, but God also graciously gave Saul signs to convince him of the Lord’s will for his life. Our subheadings are: ‘Samuel anoints Saul’, ‘Signs for Saul’, ‘Spirit of God comes on Saul’ and, ‘Secret kept’.

**1. Samuel anoints Saul**

After feasting together and spending the night together, Samuel sent Saul on his way home with the assurance that his lost donkeys had been found (9:20,26). But as they parted on the outskirts of Ramah, Samuel asked to have a word with Saul in private; he wanted to give Saul a message from God (9:27). What Samuel did next must have surprised Saul, although strange things had been happening ever since he came to Ramah the previous evening- like being made guest of honour at a feast, and being told he was ‘the desire of Israel’ (9:20). Now, with less than 24hours notice, this man of God takes a flask of oil and pours it over Saul’s head (10:1).

This was no ordinary oil- it was olive oil, but oil

 set aside for holy use. Priests were anointed with holy oil (Exod 30:25-30). Samuel was using this oil to anoint the first king of Israel. He said as much to Saul: ‘Has not the Lord anointed you leader of his inheritance’ (10:1 NIV). The people of Israel were God’s special people and his inheritance. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT, has Samuel saying additional words in this verse, as noted in the margin of many Bibles. Some think these words should be included, if only for the reference to signs that assure Saul of God’s calling upon his life. Samuel goes on to tell Saul of various people he will meet as he returns home to Gibeah.

**2. Signs for Saul**

The first of the signs given by the prophet was Saul’s finding two men by Rachel’s grave as he went on his way back home. This grave was in the territory of Benjamin (10:2). Note the precise location and the exact number of men. These were not vague predictions from the back page of the Women’s Weekly! Saul would meet two men by Rachel’s grave that very day. In Genesis we read that Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin while traveling from Bethel to Bethlehem, and Jacob set up a pillar to mark her grave (Gen 35:19,20). Tourists today may be shown Rachel’s grave at a place close to Bethlehem, but the Bible says, ‘in the territory of Benjamin’.

In addition to the precise place and the exact number of men that Saul would meet on his way home, Samuel told him what these men would say to him. They would tell Saul that his lost donkeys had been found and that his father was now worrying about his son (10:2). These men may have known Kish, although this was still far from home.

A second sign given to Saul as he returned home would be found at the ‘terebinth tree of Tabor’ (10:3). At this place, Saul would meet three men going to Bethel to worship God. Again note the precision of the prediction. One of these men would be carrying goats, three young goats, another would be carrying bread, three loaves of bread, and the third would be carrying a skin of wine (10:3). By the laws of probability this combination of numbers and objects was highly improbable. And that is not all! These three men would greet Saul and give him some bread, two loaves of bread to be precise (10:4). This bread was being taken as an offering to God at Bethel but Saul accepted two loaves from them. He would effectively become part of this trio going to worship.

The third sign given to Saul is told in more detail because it will impact the very heart of Saul. I almost said Paul, as in the apostle Paul. He was of course, called Saul when the risen Christ met him on the Damascus road and he became a new man. The original Saul would meet a group of prophets as he neared his home town of Gibeah. Noted here is a Philistine outpost in this town, and a hill of God or high place from which a group of prophets were coming down. Saul would meet these prophets as they played various musical instruments and prophesied (10:5). Who were these prophesying men? They were not prophets like Samuel who brought revelations from the Lord- although Samuel was leader of such a group (19:20). Their prophesying consisted of Spirit-inspired enthusiastic praising of God. There is no indication that they cut themselves but Satan-inspired prophets did this (1Kings 18:28, 29). These groups of prophets are also called ‘sons of the prophets’ (2Kings 5:22); they appear from these early days of the monarchy. Different groups had different leaders or fathers, so it seems.

Saul would not only see this band of musical prophets coming down from the high place but would join them in their animated prophesying. ‘The Spirit of the Lord will come upon you, and you will prophesy with them and be turned into another man’ (10:6). We do not necessarily equate this with what happened to the apostle Paul on the Damascus road, but it was the same Spirit of God that was poured out upon both men. In the NT, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit upon his disciples after his ascension; the Holy Spirit is given to all believers as a guarantee (2Cor 1:22). But the Spirit of the Lord later departed from Saul when the Spirit of the Lord came upon David (16:13, 14).

When Saul saw these signs given by Samuel come to pass, he was assured that God was with him to do what he was being called, and indeed anointed, to do (10:7- also see 11:6f). In the meantime, he was to go down to Gilgal and wait seven days for Samuel to come. Samuel would make sacrifices according to his priestly duties, and also show Saul what he must do (10:8). The anointed, but not yet proclaimed, king of Israel would be the king appointed by God and responsible to God, the true king of Israel. He would not only read the Law of Moses (Deut 17:18, 19), but would listen to God’s prophet, who at this time was Samuel. We know of a later prophet called Elijah, who spoke God’s word to King Ahab.

**3. Spirit of God comes on Saul**

As Saul turned to leave Samuel and return home, God changed his heart (10:9). In the short time Saul was at Ramah, Samuel had treated him like royalty and actually anointed him as leader of the nation. He had given Saul signs by which he would be assured of God’s calling upon his life, and all these signs came to pass that day (10:9). Saul did not live that far from Ramah, but still things were ‘happening’ fast. This would be a day to remember for Samuel, and especially for Saul. His turning to leave Samuel was accompanied by an inner turning or change of heart, brought about by God himself.

This change of heart was confirmed to Saul as he reached home and saw Samuel’s third sign, a band of prophets coming down the hill towards him. These men were prophesying and praising God as they played their instruments. Saul the donkey-keeper started prophesying with them when the Spirit of God came upon him, just as Samuel said (10:6, 10). God had already changed his heart. His prophesying with the band of prophets was confirmation of this inner change, confirmation of the Spirit of God coming upon him.

The townspeople were probably watching the group of prophets coming down from the high place. They would also have seen Saul returning home after four days away looking for his father’s lost donkeys. When Saul joined the band of prophets they would have been shocked. Was this the son of Kish that they knew? Saul had changed, but how and why? Together they asked, ‘Is Saul among the prophets?’ (10:11). Saul was a different man and they had no explanation for his change of character and conduct. They were not aware of his meeting with Samuel, and certainly not aware of Saul being anointed.

In searching for an answer for Saul’s change of character, one man asked, ‘And who is their father?’ the father of the prophets, but no one answers him (10:12). The local people were astonished at the change they saw in Saul, so much so that the words, ‘Is Saul also among the prophets?’ became proverbial for an unexpected or unusual event in their lives (10:12). We might say something like, ‘Well, blow me down’.

**4. Secret kept**

With the people of his home town stunned and almost speechless at the change they saw in Saul, Saul himself went on up to the high place, the place where the band of prophets had come from (10:13). It appears that Saul’s uncle was sent to speak with Saul and find out what was going on. His first question was, ‘Where did you go?’ (10:14). Sent by his father to find lost donkeys, and coming home prophesying with a band of prophets, called for an explanation. Who or what had Saul seen? Saul’s answer was straightforward, but he did not reveal everything that happened. He and his servant went to ask Samuel the prophet for help in finding the lost donkeys. The uncle asked Saul what Samuel had said but all Saul revealed to his uncle was that Samuel told him the donkeys had been found (10:15, 16).

‘But about the matter of the kingdom, he did not tell him what Samuel had said’ (10:16). Saul must have been assured that his anointing by Samuel was from God, but Samuel had told him to go down to Gilgal and wait further instructions. Up till now, only he and Samuel knew what the Lord had said regarding the kingdom, the kingdom of Israel, although his changed behaviour had aroused curiosity among the people of his home town at least. Saul would wait upon God and the prophet of God to show him the next step in his journey towards becoming the leader of God’s people.

‘Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength’ (Isa 40:41). A couple of years later, Saul as king would fail this same test of waiting upon the Lord (13:8, 9). Do you find it hard waiting upon the Lord? Have you come to grief from failing to do so? We must learn to wait upon the Lord, and move ahead in the strength he gives to us when we do wait. Be confident that the Lord knows what is best for you and your family, and wait upon him. Wait for the Lord to fulfil his good pleasing and perfect will (Rom 12:2).

**Saul proclaimed king**  Text: 1Samuel 10:17-27

There are over forty different tribes in the nation of Kenya. I have a Christian friend, a former student, who belongs to the Kikuyu tribe, which is the largest. Intertribal conflicts are not uncommon. As a democratic nation, they get to elect their president. But most people vote according to their tribe, so a Kikuyu man is generally elected president. Tribalism may prevent election of the best man as president. In fact, tribalism is often stirred up by politicians ahead of an election.

Israel was made up of twelve tribes of different sizes. In Numbers 2 Moses records the size of each tribe. Benjamin was of comparable size at that time, but was decimated by a civil war, recorded in Judges 20; the site of this war was the town of Gibeah, Saul’s home town. The elders of Israel had asked Samuel to make them a king so they could be like other nations. As their judge and prophet, Samuel felt rejected by the elders, but the Lord said He was the one they were rejecting. The Lord graciously agreed to their request/demand, but not before warning them of the consequences of having a human king like other nations.

Moreover, this human king would not ascend to the throne in the same was as pagan kings. They established their rule through fighting and a lot of bloodshed no doubt. In Israel, the people were wise enough to let Samuel, or the Lord, choose their king. Democracy would have resulted in a king from the largest tribe. Remember that before this time judges were chosen and empowered by the Lord as leaders of the nation. When the Lord told Samuel to make them a king, it would not be exactly like other nations. Samuel would make them a king but he would be chosen by the Lord. How would Samuel and the people know the man of God’s choice? How would they know the will of God?

In the previous chapter, we followed a donkey-keeper called Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin, looking for lost donkeys but finding the prophet Samuel. The Lord spoke into the ear of Samuel, telling him to speak to Saul and anoint him as leader (9:15-16). Samuel gave Saul three signs to confirm his anointing as being from the Lord. But up to the middle of chapter 10, only Samuel and Saul knew about Saul being anointed. The Lord had spoken to Samuel, and Samuel obeyed the voice of the Lord. The Lord does not speak ‘in the ear’ today, but he does speak to us through his word, through the Bible. Be careful with Christians who claim to have ‘a word from the Lord’, a word that ends all discussion. Sometimes this ‘word from the Lord’ may be contrary to the Bible, like ‘a word’ telling them to divorce their spouse.

Samuel knew the will of God because God spoke ‘in his ear’, but why did he then keep this a secret? We see him gently dealing with Saul to convince him of God’s will; God does not force anyone to do his will. Samuel gave him signs, and allowed the Lord to touch Saul’s heart, which he did: ‘God changed Saul’s heart’ (10:9). Saul must have been sure it was God’s will for him to lead the nation, even if he was reluctant to accept this (10:21). But he did not force himself upon the people after he was anointed. Samuel would lead the people into the knowledge of God’s will by yet another sign from the Lord. It is amazing how God, in his own ways, works all things together for good, this good sometimes being to convince us of his will for our lives.

In the verses before us today, we see how the Lord finally made Saul king, with the people shouting, ‘Long live the king!’ (10:24). When the people gathered at Mizpah they heard the ‘historical facts’, which did not substantiate their call for a king. Our second subheading is, ‘Hidden among the luggage’, our third, ‘Held to account’ and our final subheading, ‘Held his peace’. Israel would have a king, but not like other nations.

**1. Historical facts**

People have very short memories, and our memories are often selective. The Lord’s memory is perfect, neither short nor selective. When Samuel called the people of Israel to assemble before the Lord at Mizpah, the Lord would remind them of a few historical facts. The last time they assembled before the Lord at Mizpah they saw the Lord thunder upon the Philistines and scatter them (7:5). God showed himself powerful to deliver them, but they rejected him and demanded a king.

Even since the Lord delivered the twelve tribes out of slavery in Egypt, he set in place a form of worship by which they would remember his grace towards them, and his power to deliver them from their enemies (10:18). But they turned away from the Lord and started worshipping other gods (7:3). The Lord would not have them worshiping other gods (Exod 20:2-5). But he would allow them to have a human king- with conditions. The conditions will be explained by Samuel as they assemble before the Lord at Mizpah. There are ‘essentials’ in our life and our worship as believers, and some things that are ‘non-essentials’. The first condition regarding a king was what has just been explained, namely that God was and will continue to be, their supreme ruler or ‘head of state’. God would choose a deputy-king or under-shepherd for them.

**2. Hidden in the luggage**

After explaining the Lord’s perspective on their demand for a king, Samuel proceeded to choose the man who would be king. He had already anointed this man, so this process was further confirmation for Samuel and for Saul, but it was the first the people saw with regard to their demand for a king. The process was one of elimination by lot, most probably with the Urim and Thummin from the breastplate of the priest.

From the tribes of Israel the tribe of Benjamin was chosen (10:20). From this tribe the family of Matri was chosen, and finally Saul, the son of Kish, was chosen. Choosing by lot was not a matter of chance. The people understood that God controlled the way the ‘dice’ fell. Jesus’ disciples employed this method of choosing a replacement for Judas, but not before applying certain qualifications (Acts 1:26). The Bible teaches that, ‘A man’s heart plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps’ (Prov 16:9). We might paraphrase, ‘Man proposes but God disposes’.

A brief moment of embarrassment followed the choosing of Saul- Saul could not be found. Embarrassing and also ironic when we remember that not long before this Saul was looking for lost donkeys. Saul tried to lose himself at the last moment; was he shy or was he humble? He could not hide from the Lord, of course. A quick prayer was answered, ‘There he is, hidden among the equipment or supplies’ (10:22). Saul was brought forward without protest to stand before the people. They saw that he was a head taller than everyone else (10:23, cf. 9:2). While the Lord looks on the heart, people look on the outside, and these people were impressed by this very tall young man. They all shouted, ‘Long live the king!’, although the praise of some was not long lived, as we will see.

The first king of Israel was chosen by the Lord. The people did not vote. The use of lots was not a lottery as such, but the appointed way of determining the will of God in those days. Samuel made it clear to the people, as Saul stood before them, that he was chosen by the Lord (10:24). We know that the Lord had earlier spoken to Samuel, and had also prepared Saul by giving him the Spirit of the Lord. This public choosing of Saul was but another element in the process of knowing the will of the Lord in the matter of making a king.

**3. Held to account**

The king of Israel was not only chosen by the Lord; he would also be held accountable by the Lord. In foretelling that the people would want a king like other nations, Moses laid down the condition that this king write a copy of the law given through Moses, and read and obey it every day (Deut 17:18-20). When proclaiming Saul king, Samuel explained to the people the regulations regarding royalty and wrote these in a book, which he set before the Lord (10:25). We are not told what Samuel wrote but the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 17, and his own words back in chapter 8, may well have featured in this book. While given as a warning to the people, these words would also serve as a reminder to the king of how not to behave as ruler of the nation. ‘Laid up before the Lord’ probably means that it was kept safe and secure in the house of the Lord.

Kings of other nations were often a law unto themselves. Whatever the laws of the land, they as sovereign were able change these laws. But the king of Israel was to fear the Lord, and acknowledge God as sovereign (Deut 17:19). He was to obey God’s holy law, just like the general population. If, or when, he turned away from these laws, he would be held accountable to the Lord. God would send his prophet or priest to remind the king of his accountability before the sovereign Lord.

Convinced that Mary, Queen of Scots, was subject to the laws of God, John Knox called for charges of murder and adultery to be brought against her. At that time (1560’s) most believed the sovereign to be the law. ‘Knox however, had this strange notion that a sovereign was under law, subject to trial by law and judgment by the people’ (Davis).

Thankfully our constitution, like that of the USA, was framed by men who feared God so incorporates Biblical principles. The number of God-fearing men in our parliament is decreasing, so changes to our constitution and laws no longer reflect Biblical principles; for example, marriage law. Our politicians are of course, accountable to the people, but let them also know that they are accountable to almighty God. Let every man and woman in this world, including you and me, know that we are accountable to God, according to the laws set down in in God’s word, the Bible. John Knox was absolutely right.

God’s law is not the means by which we are saved, but it is the law by which we will be judged, unless, by the grace of God, we have repented and been forgiven, and our names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

**4. Held his peace**

‘Politics’ they say, ‘is a tough business’. It is also a dangerous in many countries, even in seemingly democratic nations; just look at what happens to opponents of the ruler in Russia! Monarchies are particularly open to abuse of power, which may extend to murder, as noted with Mary, Queen of Scots. When Saul was proclaimed king of Israel all the people shouted, ‘Long live the king!’ (10:24). After this proclamation, Saul went back to Gibeah, accompanied by valiant men whose hearts God had touched (10:26). But the ‘all’ was not exactly all because some trouble makers despised Saul, saying, ‘How can this man save us’ (10:27). They despised the Lord’s anointed. The Lord did not act to judge them at this point in time, and neither did Saul. Saul ‘held his peace’ (10:27). Saul would need wisdom from above in order to lead this nation, this nation of God’s people (James 3:17). He will hear a call to put these rebels to death in the next chapter (11:12).

Our Lord Jesus is the perfect king, but in this fallen world he brought, and continues to bring, division, with many rejecting him. ‘Is this not the carpenter’s son?’ his own people said (Matt 13:55), while the elders said, ‘Who gave you authority to do these things’ (Matt 21:23). As Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time, great crowds proclaimed him king, but a few days later they were calling for him to be crucified. Fallen man is fickle, and rebellious towards authority. We do not like submitting to others, even those appointed by the Lord and especially not to the Lord himself. But the sooner we submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the sooner we will know the joy of the Lord and the peace that he gives.

**They made Saul king**  Text: 1Samuel 11

Joshua led the people of God into the land of Canaan. After his death ‘the Lord raised up judges to deliver them out of the hands of those who plundered them’ (Judg 2:16). ‘God gave them judges for about four hundred and fifty years, until Samuel the prophet’, and when Samuel got old the people asked for a king, ‘so God gave them Saul, son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years’ (Acts 13:20,21). Note how the apostle Paul refers to people and time periods as he preached the gospel in Pisidian Antioch.

The Bible is not just a collection of stories and wise sayings. It is a history of God and his creation, including human beings. This history centres upon a people group chosen by God, a group through whom he would make known his will, his law, and his grace to the whole world. Stories and wise sayings are there, but do try to understand the ‘big story’ of the Bible with its timeline. The history of the Bible is your history if you are one of God’s chosen children.

In asking for a king, the people of Israel were rejecting God as their King. But God, in his grace, told his prophet Samuel to make them a king- that was in chapter 8. In chapter 9 we saw the Lord sending Saul to meet Samuel, and Samuel secretly anointing Saul as king. In chapter 10 we saw lots being drawn in a public choosing of Saul as king, and the people shouted, ‘Long live the king!’ But after this, Saul went back home to look after the farm. Just when will we see Saul become king? Samuel had no doubts, but Saul was a bit reticent, and there were some rebels who resented him being chosen as their king.

The Lord was granting this people a king, but this king would not be like ‘all the nations’. The Lord would choose this man, and this man would be accountable to the Lord. Moreover, he would be empowered by the Lord for the task given him. Saul had already experienced the Spirit of the Lord coming upon him, by which he prophesied (10:6). He would experience another empowering by the Spirit of God before being installed as king. This is the story of chapter 11. Our subheadings are: ‘Siege of Jabesh Gilead’, ‘Spirit of God upon Saul’, ‘Slaughter of the enemy’ and, ‘Saul acknowledges the Lord’.

**1. Siege of Jabesh Gilead**

In giving his people the land of Canaan, the Lord left the surrounding nations so that through them he might test Israel (Judg 2:22). When these nations attacked Israel and they cried out to the Lord, he sent them judges to deliver them. These nations were a bit like Paul’s thorn in the flesh. Has the Lord allowed you to suffer in some way to test you and keep you faithful to him?

The Philistines were always threatening Israel but nations from the east, including the Ammonites, threatened them also (Judg 3:13). The Ammonites were descendants of Lot; they lived on the fringes of the desert east of the Jordan River. Jabesh Gilead was a fortified town in the territory of Gad, between the Jordan and the Ammonites, in the broader region of Gilead. A man called Nahash, meaning ‘serpent’ in Hebrew, was leader of the Ammonites. While the Philistines pressed Israel from the west, Nahash decided to attack from the east. He may have been on a brutal rampage for some time, gouging out the right eye of everyone he captured. An introductory verse to this chapter found in the Dead Sea Scrolls tells us this, and that seven thousand men escaped to the fortified city of Jabesh Gilead.

Our chapter begins with Israelites held up in Jabesh Gilead, ready to make a treaty with the attacking Ammonites. If both sides agreed to them becoming vassals of the Ammonites, bloodshed could be avoided. But the condition set by Nahash was the brutal gouging out of the right eyes of the Israelites (11:2). The Israelites were horrified, as we are. Such brutality had not ceased. Were we not shocked when Muslim militants started cutting off the hands of their prisoners? The brutality of Nahash the serpent was aimed at humiliating the Israelites and mocking their God. It would also have meant these men could no longer use a bow and arrow or even a sword. With their left eyes covered by their shield, they could not see to shoot or fight.

Nahash demonstrated arrogance typical of those who hate God’s people. The atheist Richard Dawkins is most arrogant, but thankfully only with his words. We do however see God’s people being brutally treated in many countries today- Nahash has his children! And Jesus has his children: ‘If the world hates you, know that it hated me before it hated you’ (John 15:18).

Horrified by the demand of Nahash, the elders among those hold up in Jabesh asked for time, for seven days, to consider their options (11:3). Their option was to call for help from fellow Israelites, but there was little hope of such help, as they and Nahash knew. Nahash was so confident of his positon that he agreed to this request- all in the providence of God of course. He allowed them to send messengers to all the tribes of Israel.

We read of these messengers coming to Gibeah of Saul in the territory of Benjamin. There was a relationship between these two places going back to the time when Gibeah was destroyed in a civil war (Judg 21). But the reason Gibeah features in this story is because this was the city of Saul, the man chosen by the Lord to be king. He had not as yet taken up his kingly duties. Saul was still looking after donkeys and oxen, but this was about to change.

**2. Spirit of God comes upon Saul**

When the messengers from Jabesh Gilead came to Gibeah with news of the Ammonite siege, and their brutal demands, there was a huge outcry. As Saul came home from his fields he heard weeping and wailing and asked what was going on, and they told him (11:5). When he heard that the Ammonites were threatening his fellow Israelites, Saul was filled with indignation and anger. It was anger inspired by the Lord and divine indignation. The Spirit of the Lord suddenly came upon Saul, stirring this anger (11:6).

In his anger, Saul took a yoke of oxen from the herd in front of him and slaughtered them. He cut the oxen into pieces which he sent to all the territories or tribes of Israel. The last time this was done it was by a Levite with the body of his wife, after she was brutally raped and murdered in Gibeah (Judg 19:29). Ironically, Saul was from the tribe that protected these perverted murderers. A man from Benjamin, rather than a Levite, was now calling Israel together to deal with another depraved group of people.

Pieces of Saul’s oxen arrived at towns throughout Israel with the message, ‘Come and join Samuel and Saul at Bezek in order to deliver our besieged brothers in Jabesh Gilead, or your oxen will end up like Saul’s’. The Lord blessed the angry response of Saul. The fear of the Lord fell upon everyone and they came as one to Samuel and Saul at Bezek. Bezek was just across the river from Jabesh Gilead. When the troops were counted there was three hundred thousand. Just why the count of those from Judah is given separately is not clear; this was years before the division in Israel (11:8).

The elders in Jabesh Gilead had asked for just seven days in which to seek help, so Saul had to act quickly. After seven days they promised to ‘come out to you’, to the Ammonites (11:3). With fighting men gathered within striking distance of Jabesh, the messengers who came were sent back to the besieged city with a most encouraging message. They were overjoyed to hear that help was on its way and would reach them by noon the next day (11:9). The men of Jabesh reported back to the Ammonites but did not tell them that help was on its way. They simply told them that the next day they would come out of their city into the hands of the Ammonites (11:10). It was assumed that they would be surrendering but they did not actually say this. They would be coming out to fight against their enemy, with the help of three hundred thousand fellow Israelites led by Saul.

Before moving on, let me quote a reflection by one commentator: “Israel cannot afford to miss the point; salvation came not because Israel had a king but because the king had Yahweh’s Spirit; it is not the institution of kingship but the power of the Spirit that brings deliverance. Nor can the church afford to miss this point. It is simply Christ’s OT way of saying, ‘without me you can do nothing’ (John 15:5b)”. On the homepage of our church website you will read that our church is not an organisation or institution but an organism in which every member is valued and has a part to play. This is because every believer has been given the Holy Spirit and is called to serve in the power of the Spirit, under the headship of Christ.

**3. Slaughter of the enemy**

There is not much to say under this subheading because the battle was brief and decisive. Saul had probably heard about Gideon and his defeat of the Midianites. Gideon had just three hundred men, whom he divided into three units to attack just before midnight (Judg 7:16). Saul had three hundred thousand men whom he divided into three units and attacked just before dawn (11:11). The defeat of the enemy was so complete that any who survived the slaughter did so alone: ‘No two of them were left together’ (11:11). We presume that the men held up in Jabesh came out as they promised, but to fight rather than have their right eye gouged out!

**4. Saul acknowledges the Lord**

Israel’s king-elect had proven himself an able and valiant leader, the leader the nation desired, as Samuel told him (9:20). This was the final step in the Lord, through Samuel, establishing Saul as the first king of Israel- almost the final step! Samuel would gather the people at Gilgal and ‘renew the kingdom there’ (11:14). God’s prophet had previously led the people of God in covenant renewal at Mizpah, where they saw the Lord deliver them from the Philistines (7:5). He gathered them again at Mizpah to witness the Lord choose them a king (10:17). He now gathered them at Gilgal, a town not far from Jericho, a town filled with history from the days of the conquest.

The wilderness generation was circumcised at Gilgal and had their first Passover here after entering Canaan. Gilgal was Joshua’s base of operations. Its significance continued with this covenant renewal by Samuel, and the confirmation of Saul as king, in the presence of the Lord (11:15). Saul would not be returning to his farm after this event. It would, in fact, be a renewal of kingship, God’s kingship over his people, with the man Saul as his earthly representative.

After Saul led in delivering the people hold up in Jabesh Gilead, some remembered those who despised Saul when he was publically chosen as king (10:27). If Saul had acted like the kings of other nations he would have put these rebels to death at this time. This is what the people expected but Saul was not a king like others. He would not exact vengeance on this day of victory. Saul openly acknowledged the hand of Yahweh in the delivery of the people that day. ‘Today the Lord has accomplished salvation in Israel’ (11:13). The victory belonged to the Lord, and here at Gilgal, Samuel made sacrifices before the Lord by way of thanksgiving for His mighty deliverance (11:15). What sacrifices are you making by way of thanking the Lord for your salvation in Jesus Christ? Surely you want to be singing his praises here in his house!

At Gilgal they also made Saul king (11:15). This was the final step in Saul becoming king. It had been a long process in which the Lord, through his prophet, was involved from beginning to end. And this would not be the end of the Lord’s involvement because this king was to listen to the voice of the Lord through his prophet. This king was to obey the law of the Lord and lead God’s people in the power of the Holy Spirit given to him for this purpose. If you think you are king of your own life, of your family, or of your church, remember the conditions of kingship placed upon the king of Israel. Do we not need regular checks on our allegiance to Christ our king, starting with Matthew 6:33?

**Covenant renewal and coronation of Saul**  Text: 1Samuel 12:1-15

In many countries bribery is a way of life; it is very difficult to get anything done without paying a bribe; in getting a job, getting your child into school, or even in getting your mail, a bribe might be demanded. In India I was often asked directly or indirectly for a bribe, but on leaving India I said that I had not knowingly paid a bribe. I do recall one time when the bridge across the river to the city and the railway station was closed to traffic for some reason and I was desperate to get my family to the train. I asked the policeman on duty to let me through and he obliged, without asking for a bribe. On my way home I stopped to give him some money by way of thanks.

I would say to the people in India that the nation would not progress while ever bribery was part of the culture. Thankfully, we still frown upon bribery in our society, but for how much longer? The laws we currently have were founded on the laws of the Bible, but for how much longer? Samuel’s sons were guilty of taking bribes and perverting justice (8:3). Unlike his sons, however, Samuel could say he had never taken a bribe. He was leader of the nation of course, and leaders are most tempted to take bribes.

Chapter 12 is Samuel’s farewell address to the people of Israel at the coronation of Saul as king. It is also a call to covenant renewal or ‘renewal of the kingdom’ (11:14). The people of Israel went to Gilgal after Saul led them in defeat of the Ammonites, ‘and there they made Saul king’ (11:15). Sacrifices were made before the Lord by way of thanksgiving to Yahweh, their covenant making and covenant keeping God. Our subheadings are: ‘Covenant kept by Samuel’, ‘Covenant broken by the people’, and ‘Covenant conditions unchanged’.

**1. Covenant kept by Samuel**

Samuel, prophet and priest in Israel, begins his address to the assembly at Gilgal by declaring his faithfulness to the covenant, which means faithfulness to God and his people. As priest, he listened to the people and brought their requests before the Lord, in particular their request for a king. He was offended by this request but still brought it before the Lord. The Lord was also offended but graciously agreed to their request, and Samuel obediently went on to choose and anoint, and now install, Saul as king.

At this Gilgal assembly, Samuel handed over leadership of the nation to Saul. He would be the last of the judges, but not the last of the prophets. The king of Israel would not be like kings of other nations; he must acknowledge the Lord and listen to the voice of the Lord’s prophet (11:13). Samuel was now old and grey headed (12:2). He mentions his sons, but they had failed to follow in the footsteps of their father. It was their failure that led to the people asking for a king. They would have to give account for their conduct one day, but this was the day for Samuel to give an account of his conduct.

Samuel puts himself in the dock as it were, ready to face accusations from the people. He does this in the presence of the Lord as Judge. He does this in the presence of Saul the king, praying that Saul will follow in his footsteps as the leader of the nation. Samuel’s confession is also a reminder and example to us that we will be put in the dock one day to face examination regarding our conduct under the terms of Christ’s covenant with us. People approaching death often want to confess their failures, and seek reconciliation with people they have offended before they die.

‘Here I am’ said Samuel, ‘Witness against me before the Lord and before His anointed’ (12:3). Samuel anticipates charges, which he answers before they are made. He had been leader of the nation since his childhood. Leaders are ‘only human’ and are tempted to covet what belongs to others, but as leaders they also have the power to take what they covet. Samuel warned the people that a king would ‘take your donkeys’, among other things (8:16). But Samuel asked if he had ever taken anyone’s ox or donkey (Exod 20:17), or cheated anyone. Had he ever used his power to oppress anyone, he asks.

As judge, Samuel was responsible for administering justice for many years. He asks if anyone in Israel wanted to accuse him of taking a bribe which blinded his eyes to justice (12:3). And, if this was the case, he promised to restore whatever he took. Confession of sin must be accompanied by restitution where possible. The people had no charges to bring against Samuel: ‘You have not cheated or oppressed us or taken anything from any man’s hand’ (12:4).

Samuel was vindicated. No one accused him of doing any wrong during his time as judge in Israel. He put himself in the dock for his own vindication, but also as an example to Saul who was taking the reins of office to reign as king in Israel. He did not have to restore anything, so it seems. What about you? How would you go if you were in the dock? Is there anything you would have to restore? Samuel’s confession was part of a formal covenant renewal ceremony. As if signing an official document, he declares the Lord, and his anointed, as witnesses (12:5). Saul was now the Lord’s anointed. Saul was now king and judge in Israel.

**2. Covenant broken by the people**

Samuel steps down from the dock as it were, and puts the people in the dock in verse 7-12. He details historical truths that they had apparently forgotten, before reminding them of their demand for a king, ‘when the Lord your God was your king’ (12:12). This demand amounted to a breach of the covenant the Lord made with them through Moses at Mt Sinai. The Lord had been faithful to his covenant, but in asking for a king they were unfaithful. Samuel had been faithful to the covenant, but they had been unfaithful. Even so, the Lord gave them a king. But let them never forget the faithfulness of God in delivering them from trouble time and time again.

Beginning with Moses and Aaron leading their forefathers out of Egypt, Samuel details a pattern of rebellion, retribution, repentance and restoration. Fear and rebellion arose when they forgot the Lord. If they had trusted the Lord they would not have ended up in so much trouble. How often is this true for you and me? Trouble brought fear and in fear they cried to the Lord, repenting of their sin, and the Lord heard their prayer and saved them.

Deliverance from Egypt was the first and greatest of all the ‘righteous acts of the Lord’ on behalf of his chosen people (12:7). The whole world, it seems, remembered this great deliverance (8:6, Josh 2:10), but Israel forgot. Even now, Samuel twice refers to the Lord raising up Moses and Aaron (12:6, 8). The Lord responded to the cries of his oppressed people by sending Moses and Aaron to deal with Pharaoh, lead the people out of Egypt, and through the wilderness all the way to Canaan. Despite the warning of Moses (Deut 6:12), they forgot the Lord their God and he gave them first into the hands of Sisera the Canaanite general, and later into the hands of the Philistines, and also the king of Moab (12:9).

The Lord gave them up to these enemies because of their apostasy, their turning away from the Lord to worship other gods, the Baals and Ashtoreths of Canaan in particular (12:10). Suffering at the hands of these enemies, the people cried to the Lord and he graciously came to deliver them, raising up judges like Gideon (Jerubbaal), Barak (Bedan), Jephthah, and Samuel himself (12:11). These very people cried to the Lord through Samuel and saw the Lord thunder against the Philistines and scatter them (7:8-11). Samuel set up a stone called Ebenezer, but even then they forgot the Lord, such was their focus on being like other nations and having a king.

Lust for the things of this world has led many a churchgoer away from the church and from the Lord. Can we be critical of the Israelites for looking to worldly means rather than the Lord in times of trouble? Are you looking to the Lord as you face difficulties, or are you trusting in other gods? The Israelites were wise enough to cry to the Lord and confess their sin. What about you? Samuel reminded the Israelites of how the Lord delivered them out the hands of their enemies on every side, and gave them peace when they prayed and repented of their sin, their sin of forsaking the Lord and worshipping Baal, the climate god, and Ashtoreth, the sex goddess (12:10, 11).

Despite all these historical accounts of the Lord delivering them when they cried to him, when Nahash, king of the Ammonites, attacked they came to Samuel asking for a king like other nations (12:12). Why did they not wait upon the Lord to deliver them as he had done with thunder against the Philistines? They had Samuel’s corrupt sons as an excuse, but their request for a king like other nations was a sinful rejection of the Lord God as their king (12:12). They were breaking the covenant God made with them through Moses and were liable to the sanctions of that covenant. But God in his grace granted them a king, yet the rules of his reign would not be like those of other kings.

**3. Covenant conditions unchanged**

The assembly at Gilgal was for the coronation of Saul as king of Israel but also for renewal of the covenant, for ‘renewal of the kingdom’ (11:14). Initially a king might be a big change for Israel, but the Lord’s covenant with his people had not changed. They desired a king and the Lord gave them a king, a king chosen by the Lord and accountable to the Lord. The king, and all the people, must continue to obey the terms of the covenant made by the Lord.

When the people of Israel were about to enter Canaan, Moses spoke to them in a farewell address- what we have as the Book of Deuteronomy. That address concluded with warnings or curses for disobedience and blessings for obedience to God’s covenant commands (Deut 28). In much the same way, Samuel warns the same people of Israel, or their descendants, that the hand of the Lord will be against them if they fail to obey the voice of the Lord (12:15). The king was included in this warning.

On the other hand, if they walked in the fear of the Lord, obeying his voice and serving or worshipping him all their hearts, ‘then both you and the king who reigns over you will continue following the Lord you God’ (12:14). Fear of the Lord means reverence, but includes respect for his judgment upon sin. Like Moses, Samuel made clear that there were two ways of life they could choose. Jesus gave the same choice. You can listen to what Jesus says and live, or you can reject his words and perish. Jesus spoke of the narrow way that leads to life and the broad way that leads to destruction (Mat 7:13, 14).

Which way have you chosen?

**Fear the Lord and serve Him** Text: 1Samuel 12:16-25

Dr Paul Brand was a missionary doctor whose main ministry was to leprosy patients in India. After working among lepers for many years, he saw first-hand the importance of bodily pain. Leprosy effectively kills the nerves in the part of the body it affects, often hands and feet. Lepers do not feel pain when they touch hot things. This doctor found lepers without toes because rats had chewed them off in the night and they felt nothing! Pain, he concluded, is a wonderful thing!

C.S Lewis looked at pain from a more theological perspective in his book, ‘The problem of pain’. He asked, like so many, if God is good and has the power to stop all suffering, why does he allow us to suffer? Pain and suffering came into the world with sin, and will be removed in the new heaven and new earth (Gen 3, Rev 21:4). In the meantime, God has a purpose for pain. Dr Brand pointed out one purpose, but C.S. Lewis draws a broader theological conclusion: ‘God whispers to us in our pleasures, speak in our conscience, but shouts in our pains; it is his megaphone to raise a deaf world’.

The prophet Samuel had gathered the people of Israel at Gilgal to crown Saul king - ‘now here is the king (12:2) - but also to renew the covenant the Lord had made with them- ‘to renew the kingdom’ (11:14). If they thought having a human king would be their salvation, they were wrong. The ‘Lord your God’ was already their king, and he had saved them from their enemies on many occasions, going back to the time of Moses and Aaron and their salvation from the brutality of Pharaoh.

Samuel told the people to stand still and listen as he reasoned with them before the Lord ‘concerning all the righteous acts of the Lord’ (12:7). Reasoning does not convince or convert a lot of people. Despite the evidence from history of the Lord saving them, the people still wanted a king like other nations.

As Samuel continues his farewell address or sermon, he again tells the people to stand before the Lord, this time to see a great work of the Lord, not just to listen to Samuel preaching. If they were sleeping while he preached, they would soon wake up and stand trembling before the Lord. God would get their attention, through pain or disaster if necessary. Our subheadings are: ‘Power of God’, ‘Promise of God’ and, ‘Prayer of Samuel’.

**1. Power of God**

Samuel told the people to stand still while he reasoned with them regarding the many times the Lord had heard their cry and delivered them from their enemies (12:7). Now he calls them to again ‘stand and see this great thing which the Lord will do before your eyes’ (12:16). Did he think that reasoning would not be sufficient to convince these people of their sin? If so, he was correct! They had to be shocked into fear and trembling before the Lord before they confessed their sin (12:19). Perhaps C.S. Lewis was thinking of such people when he wrote about God speaking through a megaphone to a deaf world; or was he thinking about you!

Most of the people were farmers, working the land allotted to them by Joshua. As they gathered at Gilgal after Saul led them in victory over the Ammonites, their wheat crops were ready for harvest. In this region summer rain was unheard of. Here in NSW we get rain at any time of the year, even during wheat harvest; I recall trying to gather grain from the ground after a hail storm decimated my experimental plots. The farmers in Israel had not experienced such a loss, not until now. Samuel said he would call upon the Lord to send thunder and rain that they might realise their great wickedness in asking for a king (12:16).

The Lord had previously sent thunder upon the Philistines to drive them away- a time they seem to have forgotten (7:10). This time the thunder and rain would be on their own crops if the Lord answered Samuel’s prayer - which he did (12:18). The people could not believe their ears or their eyes. They stood in awe and fear at this weather miracle, and at their crops which would been damaged by the rain.

Because Samuel told them what was about to happen, they greatly feared the Lord and Samuel (12:18). Their pagan neighbours would have started crying to Baal or whatever their weather god was called, even though such gods had no power over the weather or climate, of course. It is amazing all the theories people come up with when they see unusual weather events. It is amazing how many people live in fear of weather events, of storms or floods or huge seas. Samuel called for thunder and rain. Elijah prayed that there would be no rain and there was no rain for three years (Ja 5:17). Jesus, of course, called for the storm to stop and it did. Since the Lord can send storms and rain, and withhold rain, should we not be fearing him rather than the weather or the climate in the way so many are doing these days?

Seeing thunder and rain at harvest time shocked the people. They trembled in fear, not fear of the climate but fear of God (12:19). They saw the power of almighty God, power they denied when they asked for a king like other nations; they had previously worshiped the gods of these nations also. They forgot that almighty God made the land they were farming, and the sea and everything in this world, and that with the same almighty power he ruled over his creation. God set in place and controls the hydrologic cycle that brings rain.

Fear of almighty God led the people to cry to Samuel, asking him to pray for them that, ‘We may not die’ (12:19). They realised that God was angry with them, so called for the prophet to intercede before almighty God. You will recall the people pleading with Moses after seeing the thunder and lightning on Mt Sinai: ‘Let not God speak with us lest we die’ (Exod 20:19). God was testing the people, and he was testing them again here at Gilgal. They realised their demand for a king had angered the Lord, and knew the only way to appease him was to confess their sin and plead forgiveness. For the first time in this chapter we hear the people speak, and they do so to confess their sin and plead for Samuel to intercede before the Lord. Very few are prepared to sit and listen to the word of the Lord these days; all they want to hear is their own voice, which does not tell them to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ!

If you have not yet confessed your sin and asked for forgiveness in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, can I ask what it will take for you to do this? Samuel reasoned with the people, as preachers of the gospel do today. The Bible is a perfectly reasonable book. You will not find it to contain any error, either historical, scientific, or even theological- depending on your preconceived theological ideas course! The people did not respond to Samuel’s reasoning, so it seems, but they did respond when the Lord hit their harvest with a thunderstorm. God impacted their lives in such a powerful way that they fell to their knees pleading for mercy. The Bible says that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, which means your knee, as well as mine (Phil 2:10). The only question is, when? Will it be today that you confess your sin or will it be when it is too late; it will be too late after you die! The decision is yours.

**2. Promise of God**

When Samuel saw the people ‘broken’ by the miracle of nature, and heard them confessing their sin, he said, ‘Do not fear’ (12:20). ‘Broken’ is a term used when wild horses are tamed, when a bit is put in their mouth and they become useful to man. You may not like this analogy, but Jesus speaks of us taking his yoke and learning from him, which is not so different (Mat 11:29). Sin is rebellion against God. Sin makes us useless to God, and indeed to everyone, including ourselves. Samuel goes on to warn them about empty things ‘which profit no one’ (12:21). The Lord wanted these people to live useful lives, trusting in Him.

God is not a capricious God, punishing for the sake of punishment. He is a gracious God, punishing for the sake of turning his people away from sin and drawing them to himself. Samuel told them not to fear, but he did not say their wickedness didn’t matter (12:20). He goes on to say that the Lord saved them ‘for his great name’s sake’ (12:22). He chose them, and he would keep them, because in his great grace he forgave their sin, even their sin of asking for king like other nations. He graciously gave them a king, but still they and the king, must follow the Lord, and ‘serve the Lord in truth with all your heart’ (12:20, 24 cf. John 4:24).

Samuel had previously called upon these people to put away foreign gods and serve the Lord only, serve him with all their hearts (7:3); they were being attacked by the Philistines at that time. Foreign gods were of no help whatsoever. What was obvious to the prophets, to Samuel and later Isaiah, and I hope obvious to you, is that lumps of wood or trees, like lumps of stone or houses, or piles of money, cannot hear you or save you. Yet these people had gone after useless and empty things, things that amount to nothing (12:21). If people tell you to follow your dreams, remember what dreams are- nothing! If you are following a human hero, they may well be nothing before you know it. But if you follow the Lord he will not let you down; ‘The Lord will not forsake his people’ (12:22).

This is a covenant promise under both the old covenant and the new covenant (Heb 13:5). As a promise, it is not dependant in any way on your worthiness. It is a promise the Lord makes because he had chosen us to serve him with all our hearts and honour his holy name. Man’s chief end is to glorify God and bring glory to his great name. He forgives our sin and saves us for his name’s sake, for the sake of the holy name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**3. Prayer of Samuel**

Samuel was addressing the people of Israel at the coronation of King Saul. He was old and stepping down as their judge and leader. But he would remain as God’s prophet and priest. As prophet, he would bring God’s word to the people, and as priest, he would intercede for them. The words in verse 23 are familiar to us, and for good reason. Listen to what Samuel promises: ‘As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord is ceasing to pray for you’ (12:23).

You know about sins of commission, about doing what is wrong, but what about sins of omission, about failing to do what is right? Have you ever thought that in failing to pray you are actually sinning against the Lord? If you fail to pray for your family, for your spouse and for your children, you are sinning against the Lord! Do not think it is the job of the priest or pastor to pray. They must pray, but you must pray also. Paul prayed for all the churches and the people in these churches. ‘Pray without ceasing’, he said (2Thess 5:17). Followers of Jesus will pray like Jesus. Jesus prayed for his disciples, and even now he intercedes for you (John 17:9, Heb 7:25).

Samuel the prophet would also continue to teach the people ‘the good and right way’ (12:23). Children will not learn what is right if they are not taught what is right. A great fallacy of modern education is the idea that children must be left to make decisions for themselves. Sure they have to make decisions, but they do so in the context of the sovereignty of God in creation and redemption, and of God’s holy law. God has declared what is the good and right way. We who know this way, the way shown to us by Jesus, must teach others this way, especially our children. How the church would grow if parents prayed for their children and taught them the good and right way.

Samuel concludes his address, urging the people to fear the Lord (12:24). They feared their enemies and the weather because they did not fear the Lord. When we fear or revere the Lord, we will serve him in truth with all our heart. The Lord will not have any half-hearted followers. No king wants half-hearted men serving in his army. He wants men and women he can trust, but above all who will trust him to lead them to victory.

One thing too many Christians forget is the warning given by Samuel, as it was given by Moses, and as given by the apostles in the NT: ‘If you do wickedly you will be swept away, both you and your king’ (12:25). No one, not even you or the king, will escape the judgment of almighty God. If you reject the grace of God you remain under his wrath and he will destroy his enemies. It is Jesus who says, ‘He who believes in the Son has everlasting life, and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him’ (John 3:36).

**Saul’s sinful sacrifice**  Text: 1Samuel 13

Saul led Israel in the defeat of the Ammonites after the Spirit of God came upon him and he rallied men from all the tribes of Israel. We are not told much about the battle but the element of surprise seems to have been key to the victory (12:11). Samuel then gathered the people at Gilgal to crown Saul king, and to renew the Lord’s covenant with Israel. Samuel was old but was still active as God’s prophet, and in praying for and teaching the people, including the king (12:23). Saul was a head taller than any other man and was showing potential as leader. To this extent he was like the kings of other nations, but Samuel warned him, and all the people, not to depart from the commandments of the Lord. The prophet would continue bringing God’s word to the people and their king.

The time gap between that gathering at Gilgal and the events of this next chapter is not clear. Our translation had a period of two years, but the Hebrew text is difficult. Some translators refer to the formula used of kings in the OT, namely, ‘so and so became king when he was X years old and ruled for Y years’- the ESV actually reads in this way. But most conclude that Saul had reined for two years when the events of this chapter occurred. This was not long into his forty year reign (Acts 13:21). Whatever the time frame, this chapter records a tragic mistake made by Saul, leading to condemnation by Samuel and indeed, divine judgment. Our subheadings are: ‘Saul’s army in retreat’, ‘Saul’s sinful sacrifice’ and, ‘Saul and Jonathan have the only swords’.

**1. Saul’s army in retreat**

Saul’s defeat of the Ammonites across the Jordan in Gilead does not seem to have fazed the Philistines to the west. Saul made Gilgal his base for operations, as Joshua had done. It was a safer distance from the Philistines than his home town in Benjamin territory. But this chapter begins with Saul assembling two thousand troops at Micmash in the hills near Bethel, while his son Jonathan commanded a further thousand troops nearby, in Gibeah of Benjamin. For some reason, Saul sent the rest of the men to their homes (13:2).

As we just said, the Philistines were not fazed by Saul leading Israel in victory over the Ammonites. The picture we get in this chapter is of the Philistines establishing outposts throughout Israel to keep the people in subjection. They shut down all blacksmiths in the land to stop the making of swords or spears. All the Israelites had was bows and arrows, and slings like David. Mind you, sharp arrows can be made from bamboo, but otherwise it was sticks, stones, and garden tools!

Jonathan decided to attack one of the Philistine outposts, probably the one near his home town. Remember the reference to a Philistine garrison on the hill of God when Saul returned from his meeting with Samuel. At that time, Samuel told Saul to go up to Gilgal and wait seven days till Samuel came to make burnt offerings and sacrifice peace offerings, and tell Saul what to do (10:8). There seems to be a connection between that command and what happens here in chapter 13.

When the Philistines heard of Jonathan’s attack upon their outpost in Geba or Gibeah they were enraged. The Israelites were rebelling and had to be dealt with. Their domination of Israel amounted to taxing and plundering from time to time, but still any rebellion had to be quickly crushed. We wonder at Putin’s plan in his invasion of Ukraine; it is driven by ego or by a desire to plunder this neighbouring country? He is certainly acting like a Philistine. We might extend the comparison to the paucity of weapons possessed by the Ukrainian army. But the Ukrainians are not as dispirited as the Israelites were.

With the Philistines on the war path, Saul blew the trumpet to call the Hebrews to arms (13:3). The message the Hebrews heard was that Saul had attacked a Philistine outpost, making the Israelites an abomination, or literally, a stench to the Philistines. I am sure propaganda was as much a part of war then as it is now. Was it propaganda from Saul that made him the attacker of the Philistines rather than his son, Jonathan? Was Saul taking the credit, or was it simply a case the king being ultimately responsible? The question remains, why was it Jonathan and not Saul taking a stand against the Philistines? In the next chapter we again see Jonathan taking the lead, and trusting in the Lord, while King Saul sat under a tree.

Having ‘blown the trumpet’, Saul gathered the troops at Gilgal. Meanwhile, the Philistines gathered their troops at Micmash. They had a massive army, as numerous ‘as the sand on the seashore’, along with thousands of chariots and horsemen (13:5). Chariots were not much use in the hills, but their army was still well equipped and ready to fight in the hills of Israel. Saul’s poorly equipped army had ‘retreated’ to Gilgal, where he was trying to rally more men for the fight. But the men of Israel were scared and started hiding in caves, in thickets, in holes, and in pits (13:6). Some even fled across the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. Even the troops with Saul at Gilgal were trembling in fear of the Philistines, which is strange because Gilgal was a long way from Philistine territory. Note that there is no mention of Samuel thus far, or of the Lord. Was Samuel leaving Saul to be tested?

**2. Saul’s sinful sacrifice**

‘In 1Samuel 12 Gilgal is the place of covenant renewal; in 1Samuel 13 it is the place of royal failure’. Saul, now King Saul, had gone to Gilgal to assemble an army to take on the Philistines; was he calling up reservists? I hear that reservists in the Russian army are not so keen to fight in Ukraine, where there is a high chance of getting killed. Saul’s men were not keen to fight the Philistines even though they were invading their land. Was this because of poor leadership or lack of arms, or both? Saul was king but he depended on Samuel for advice and was waiting for Samuel to come as arranged.

Samuel told Saul to wait seven days in Gilgal for him to come (10:8). Saul was aware of what Samuel said but his men were deserting in droves and he was getting worried. On the seventh day he decided to act without Samuel. Samuel was coming to make burnt offerings and sacrifice peace offerings, ‘and show you what you should do’ (10:8). But Saul ran out of patience, or, more to the point, failed to trust in the Lord and His prophet. He ordered the burnt offering and peace offerings to be brought and ‘he offered the burnt offering’ (13:9). As soon as he had finished Samuel showed up, and Saul went out to greet him (13:10).

Was it wrong for Saul to offer a burnt offering? At a later time King Uzziah was struck with leprosy for entering the holy place of the temple to burn incense; he transgressed into the ministry of the priest (2Chron 26:1f). Some think that Saul had a priest make the burnt offering for him. In any case, David built an altar and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings without being reprimanded (2Sam 24:25). Saul, on the other hand, was severely reprimanded by Samuel. Why? Because he disobeyed Samuel’s command. Saul knew the importance of sacrificing before a battle but not the importance of obeying God’s command. He never learned that to obey is better than sacrifice (15:22). Some Christians never learn this lesson either- their worship is a matter of ritual and lip service, as Isaiah says (Isa 29:13).

‘What have you done?’ said Samuel (13:11). Saul explained how the Philistines were threatening, and his men were deserting him, and Samuel had not come within the appointed time. Samuel had actually come, even if was late on the seventh day. Saul’s problem was that he feared the Philistines more than he feared the Lord. He feared the Philistines would come all the way to Gilgal before he had made supplication to the Lord. Notice all the ‘I’s in his excuse to Samuel: ‘I have not made supplication’, and, ‘I felt compelled’ (13:12). He thought everything depended on him, when he should have been trusting in the Lord and waiting, as commanded by Samuel.

It is easy to slip into the mode of thinking that everything depends on me, and if I don’t do something it will never get done. Whatever we do, let us do it to the Lord (Col 3:23). Let us know that, if it is the will of the Lord, the Lord will see that it gets done, with or without me! If the job will not get done without you maybe it is not the Lord’s work. Saul had forgotten the promise given by the Lord not long before this- in the previous chapter in fact: ‘The Lord will not forsake his people for his great name’s sake’ (12:22). He had also forgotten the great deliverances of the Lord, even in his lifetime.

The second part of Samuel’s command was the promise to, ‘show you what you should do’ (10:8). Saul was about to go off to battle without any word of guidance from the Lord. How disastrous that would be. Imagine getting married without any guidance from the Lord. Imagine getting a job without any guidance from the Lord. Imagine simply living without any guidance from the Lord. ‘It is one thing to be in terrible distress; it is another to be alone in that distress’. Yet how many Christians, and how many churches, are going it alone, depending on rituals and programs and paraphernalia, but without the Lord’s guidance, without the preaching of the word?

Samuel reprimanded Saul telling him, ‘You acted foolishly’, and, ‘You have not kept the commandments of the Lord your God’ (13:13). Remember what Samuel said at the covenant renewal ceremony? If you do not obey the voice of the Lord ‘you will be swept away’ (12:25). Samuel told Saul that because he failed to obey the Lord’s command he would be swept away, or more particularly, his kingdom or dynasty would not continue; this was rather tragic given the bravery and the faith of his son.

Saul would have no place in God’s great plan to bring salvation to the Hebrews, and also the Gentiles. In his foreordaining whatsoever comes to pass, the Lord had already chosen another man, a man after his own heart (13:14). That man was David, although his name has not yet appeared in the record- we often fail to locate this wonderful description of David because it appears here in the record of Saul.

‘Then Samuel arose and went up from Gilgal to Gibeah’ (13:15). How tragic! Tragic for Saul and tragic for the nation. Their king, who promised so much, failed to trust and obey the Lord. Samuel went off without showing Saul what he should do (10:8). Saul was on his own. He had an army of just six hundred men to fight the Philistine army of thousands still camped at Micmash, and no word from the Lord.

**3. Saul and Jonathan had the only two swords**

The people thought that having a king like other nations would ensure victory over their enemies. They were mistaken. Jonathan attacked the Philistines, but when they came up to Micmash the Israelites fled, and with good reason- their king was a failure and they had no weapons. Their king has no guiding word from the Lord. It is interesting that they all end up back in Gibeah: Samuel, Jonathan, and Saul with his depleted army (13:15, 16). In the next chapter we find Saul sitting under a tree with his men (14:2).

The Philistines sent raiders out in all directions across the land (13:17, 18). They must have occupied the land for some time because they had shut down all blacksmith shops in Israel (13:19). They did not want the Israelites making any weapons. To sharpen their farming tools they had to pay a high price for the Philistines to do it.

After Jonathan attacked the Philistine outpost at Gibeah, the Philistines assembled a huge, fully equipped army at Micmash; they would teach Israel not to rebel. Here at the end of this chapter we find a depleted and dispirited army led by King Saul. They had no spears or swords, apart from two swords, one with Saul and one with Jonathan (13:22). They would have to fight with forks and axes.

What a hopeless situation they were in. How did it come to this? Would this be the end of Israel, the end of God’s chosen people?

It has come to this because of Saul’s failure to trust and obey the Lord. Saul took matters into his own hands, and this meant disaster. Saul and the people were in a helpless and hopeless situation. But remember Samuel’s promise: ‘The Lord will not forsake his people for his great name’s sake’ (12:22).

A thousand years later, as Jesus of Nazareth went through the same land of Israel, he found the people were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Mat 9:36). At this time they were being oppressed by the Romans, but it was spiritual oppression that Jesus saw. Jesus was moved with compassion for the people, so moved that he went to the cross, where he defeated our greatest enemies, Satan and death. Because of his victory in the cross and the resurrection we, his chosen people, now live free from the dominion of sin. We live in the wonderful saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Jonathan steps out in faith** Text: 1Samuel 14:1-23

Sons often follow in their father’s footsteps, but not always. In fact, in this book of 1Samuel sons rarely followed in their father’s footsteps. The book begins with Eli’s two sons being so wicked that the Lord determined to put them to death, both on the same day (2:34). Samuel’s sons were also corrupt. Saul, the first king of Israel had three sons, the eldest being Jonathan. Saul proved not to be a covenant-keeping king. He failed to obey God’s command through the prophet Samuel, and Samuel left him without showing him what to do with regard to an imminent Philistine attack. Saul was left in the dark as it were, but his son Jonathan proves to be a man of faith, who trusted in the Lord.

We are not told of Jonathan’s stature- his father was a head taller than anyone else- but we are told of his courage, courage that comes from trusting in the Lord. Jonathan did things in the strength of the Lord, not in his own strength. Moreover, he believed that nothing is too hard for the Lord. Mary, the mother of Jesus, learnt that, ‘With God nothing is impossible’ (Luke 1:37). The apostle Paul said, ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me’ (Phil 4:12). Our subheadings are: ‘Counsel for Saul’, ‘Courage and faith in Jonathan’, ‘Considered test of Jonathan’s’, and ‘Confusion and victory from the Lord’.

**1. Counsel for Saul**

Samuel was going to show Saul what to do, but after condemning Saul for his sinful sacrifice, he left Gilgal to return to Gibeah without doing so (13:15). Saul was left with an army of about six hundred men after many deserted in fear of the Philistines, and because of poor leadership from Saul, it seems. In this chapter, the trembling of Saul’s soldiers is replaced by trembling among the Philistines. We find Saul back in his home town of Gibeah sitting under a pomegranate tree with his six hundred soldiers. Samuel was also in Gibeah but was not talking to Saul; when confronted with his sin, Saul did not repent but simply made excuses to Samuel.

Who did Saul now go to for counsel? Cut off from the counsel of the Lord, Saul turned to man for counsel; he has not yet reached the depths of consulting a medium or witchdoctor (27:7). The rejected king of Israel went to the rejected priest in the line of Eli. The mention of Ichabod reminds us of the time when the glory departed from Israel. Phinehas, Eli’s wicked son, had another son, who had a son called Abijah. This man or this priest was in possession of the ephod worn by the high priest (14:3).

Inside the breastplate of the ephod were the Urim and Thummin used by the priest when seeking to know the will of the Lord. Saul was not asking him the will of the Lord at this time but he appears to do so a bit later (14:18). At that time Saul asked the priest to, ‘Bring the ark of God here’, but the Septuagint has, ‘Bring the ephod here’. Did he want to know God’s will with regard to attacking the Philistines? If so, he was too late because his son Jonathan had already made a move. When Saul learned of this, he told the priest to, ‘Withdraw your hand’ (14:19). It was too late because the enemy had already been engaged by none other than his son Jonathan.

**2. Courage and faith of Jonathan**

Jonathan was at Gibeah in charge of one third of Israel’s army when he first attacked the Philistine outpost (13:3). The Philistines were enraged and gathered to put down this rebellion in the occupied lands of Israel. With thousands of Philistines assembled at Micmash, Saul and Jonathan were in Gibeah with a few hundred soldiers. One day Jonathan decided to go over to the Philistine outpost with his young armour-bearer; ‘But he did not tell his father’ Saul (14:1). He later says that his father had troubled Israel (14:29). Clearly, Saul was doing nothing in the face of the Philistine threat. As far as geography is concerned, the Philistines were camped across the valley from where Saul and Jonathan were hold up. Steep cliffs lined the sides of this valley.

Jonathan decided to take his young armour-bearer, cross the valley or ravine and engage the Philistines in their outpost. This showed a lot of courage on Jonathan’s part, as well as ability; climbing the steep cliff was not for the faint-hearted. Where did Jonathan find such courage? From his conversation with his young armour-bearer we learn of his disdain for the Philistines, ‘these uncircumcised’ fellows, these pagans who dared threaten the people of almighty God (14:6). We will soon hear David calling Goliath, ‘an uncircumcised Philistine… defying the armies of the living God’ (17:26). Many years later we hear the apostle Paul saying, ‘If God is for us, who can be against us’ (Rom 8:31). Paul was referring to spiritual rather than physical battles of course; Jonathan and David also knew their battle was more than just physical. Saul was the one counting his men and coming up short!

Jonathan was not counting his men or trusting in his own strength. He was going to engage the huge Philistine army with his armour- bearer, in other words, alone. But he would not be alone if the Lord was with him. Jonathan was stepping out in faith. He is not mentioned in the ‘Heroes of faith’ chapter in Hebrews but the reference to those, ‘who through faith subdued kingdoms’ probably includes Jonathan (Heb 11:33). Jonathan did not know if the Lord would ‘work for us’, but he did know that the Lord was able to save ‘by many or by few’ (14:6). This is faith.

Faith begins with a knowledge of God. Faith must be firmly founded in our knowledge of God and his promises. Jonathan did not, at this point, know whether the Lord would give him victory, but he knew that He was able to do so. He was not relying on dreams or feelings for guidance; he knew that the Lord was powerful to deliver, and with this knowledge he stepped out in faith. His father, remember, was sitting under a tree, paralysed by fear. The missionary, William Carey, wisely said, ‘Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God’. Knowing that, with God nothing is impossible, Jonathan went off to attempt a great thing for God. We are not told of him praying, but clearly his life was one of trusting in the God of miracles. He was not going to die wondering what God might have done through him.

**3. Considered test of Jonathan’s**

As Jonathan sought the will of God about attacking the Philistines, he firstly assured himself that the Lord was powerful to save his people, even with just a few men. Had he read the story of Gideon? We also note that he listened to his young armour-bearer, who assured Jonathan that he was with him all the way. It is wise to listen to the opinions of others when seeking God’s will, even if we reject it in the end. Of course, we need to be wise in choosing whom to ask for advice! Jonathan did not tell his father because he knew he would not get wise advice.

Stepping out in faith does not mean ‘blind faith’. Jonathan had a plan, a plan which he brought before the Lord by way of a test. Gideon had his ‘fleece test’ which was not condemned, although he was afraid of angering the Lord when he asked for a second test. Jonathan asked only once, but it was a reasoned test or sign he asked for. When the Philistines spotted the two Hebrews coming towards their outpost they would most likely come out to engage them. But in their arrogance they might say, ‘Come up to us’. Jonathan said that this would be their sign from the Lord that He would deliver the Philistines into his hand (14:10).

In human terms they had no hope of defeating the Philistines, and nothing on the ground had changed apart for Jonathan stepping out in faith, trusting the Lord to give him a confirming sign. We may be reluctant to set a test for the Lord, but we do ask for signs to confirm our stepping out in faith. Finding out that there was a Christian Agricultural College in India looking for staff was a confirmation for us to go to India. The Lord led us over a period of years to become missionaries but we were asking where.

Jonathan and his helper set out towards the Philistine outpost. The Philistines saw them and mocked at the Hebrews coming out of hiding (14:11). Then they said the words Jonathan was waiting to hear: ‘Come up to us and we will teach you a lesson’ (14:12 NIV). With confidence, and in the strength given by the Lord, Jonathan and his helper climbed the cliff face on their hands and knees. The Philistines were surprised when Jonathan started attacking. In no time he had killed twenty men in this outpost- the area is given at about half an acre (14:14).

**4. Confusion and victory from the Lord**

Jonathan’s attack stunned the Philistines. Twenty fell in a flash, and Jonathan was coming towards their camp. He was just one man but the Lord honoured his faith and sent the Philistines into panic and confusion: ‘There was trembling in the camp’ and among all the Philistine troops and raiders (14:15). Part of the confusion was Hebrew prisoners or traitors turning against the Philistines (14:21). Again the story of Gideon comes to mind; Gideon stepped out in faith with just three hundred men but it was the Lord who ‘set every man’s sword against his companion throughout the whole camp’ (Judg 7:22). We read in verse 15 that ‘the earth quaked so that there was a very great trembling’; this may refer to an earthquake, but not necessarily.

Back in Gibeah, the trembling Saul was told that the Philistines were in confusion and were retreating. He was not looking for any divine intervention, so assumed one of his men must have been behind the disturbance in the Philistine camp. Saul the administrator, called the roll and was surprised to learn that Jonathan and his armour-bearer were missing. It is interesting that a roll of six hundred man had to be called for him to find that his own son was missing!

Saul was still seeking a sign from the Lord through the priest with regard to attacking the Philistines. But Jonathan already had a sign and the Lord was delivering the Philistines into his hand. Saul gave up seeking a sign and rushed to join the battle. He saw what we have just described, namely confusion in the Philistine camp with men fighting each other; Israel remember, had only two swords (13:22). In addition to the Hebrews already in the Philistine camp revolting, others came out of their hiding places to join in chasing the Philistines out of the land (14:22).

‘So the Lord saved Israel that day’ (14:23). These words are the words of the narrator; clearly Jonathan would have echoed these words. But would Saul have said such words? He took the credit for an earlier attack by Jonathan (13:4), and is responsible for the almost tragic end to this story that follows.

David becomes the next king and the hero of the nation. He has already been called, ‘A man after God’s heart’ but let us remember Jonathan, for his knowledge of God and his faith in the Lord. He believed that nothing is impossible for God, and God did not fail him. Do you believe, firstly, that with God nothing in impossible, and, secondly, that the Lord will never fail you? Are you prepared to step out in faith, trusting the Lord to be with you, and bless what you, by faith, seek to do by way of serving the Lord?

**Saul’s foolish oath** Text: 1Samuel 14:24-52

‘His ongoing egocentrism was turning into an all-consuming passion that threatened the very welfare of the nation’. You might think that these words come from the newspaper regarding the resignation of Boris Johnson as the Prime Minister of the UK. He was forced to resign because a woeful lack of integrity, for his foolish conduct and deceptive speech. But in his resignation speech all we heard about was his achievements while in office; not a word about this lack of integrity. He lamented losing, ‘the greatest job in the world’. Spurgeon would have disagreed with him on this point because, as a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ, he claimed to have the greatest job in the world!

The words I quoted are actually comments on the passage of the Bible that we have just read. ‘His ongoing egocentrism was turning into an all-consuming passion that threatened the very welfare of the nation’ is a comment on King Saul. Saul was crowned king of Israel by the prophet Samuel. The people praised him shouting, ‘Long live the king’ (10:24). Saul led the people in victory over the Ammonites, but when the Philistines gathered to attack Israel he faltered; he made an unlawful sacrifice at Gilgal, and Samuel left him. Saul was left without the counsel of God. It was his son, Jonathan, who stepped out in faith and courage to confront the huge Philistine army.

The Lord saw Jonathan’s faith and answered his prayer, giving him a sign to attack. The Philistines fled in fear because of confusion sent by the Lord. Saul joined in the attack, which resulted in ‘the Lord saving Israel that day’ (14:23). In the second half of this chapter we are told of how King Saul put his men under oath not to eat anything that day. Saul’s foolish oath led to starving soldiers eating blood, and almost to the death of his own son. This chapter ends with a Boris Johnson-like history, indeed a history like that of most men and women regarded as heroes in the eyes of the world. The Bible acknowledges this ‘world history’, but is more concerned with ‘divine history’, a history from God’s perspective. God, as we know, is the final judge of history. From God’s perspective Saul was finished; the focus turns to his successor, David.

**1. Saul’s foolish oath**

The victory announced in verse 23- ‘So the Lord saved Israel that day’- turns into a disaster in verse 24- ‘The men of Israel were distressed that day’. This distress was initially fainting from hunger-induced weakness. Soon their distress would come from Saul’s treatment of his son. For some reason, Saul put his men under oath as they went into battle: ‘Cursed is the man who eats any food until evening’ (14:24). Why did he do this? We know that an oath is taken seriously by the Lord, and Saul knew this. Knowing the seriousness of this oath, he was ready to kill his own son (14:44). It seems that Saul took this oath to ensure victory over his enemies- note the focus on ‘me’ in verse 24: ‘Before I have taken vengeance on my enemies’, and the contrast with verse 23- ‘The Lord saved Israel that day’.

Saul was acting like a pagan king in trying to twist God’s arm into giving him victory. I recall a Muslim farm worker almost fainting as he fasted during a hot summer; he was not even allowed to drink water. Ellison comments, ‘Saul’s oath (24) belongs to those superstitions which think that God is more likely to listen if men indulge in unnecessary self-denial’. He goes on to comment on verse 37: ‘If God withheld his answer, it was because He often takes our stupidities as seriously as we mean them’. Some Christians are not averse to self-denial aimed at twisting God’s arm. Note the contrast between the way Jonathan approached the battle and the way Saul approached it. Jonathan made no oath; he simply stepped out in faith, trusting in the Lord to give him a sign.

Jonathan was not with Saul’s army when they were put under this foolish oath, so he did not know about it. As he and the rest of the men pursued the Philistines, they came to a forest where they saw honey or honeycomb on the ground (14:25). Jonathan dipped his rod into the honeycomb and ate some honey. It tasted good and, of course, was full of energy, so his face brightened, meaning his strength was renewed (14:27). The men looked on in surprise, longing for some ‘renewed strength’ themselves, but fearful of Saul’s oath. Eventually one of them told Jonathan of the curse pronounced by his father upon anyone who ate any food that day (14:28).

When Jonathan was told about his father’s oath he commented: ‘My father made trouble for the country’ (14:29 NIV). He seems to have lost confidence in his father’s ability to lead the nation; remember him not telling his father when he went to attack the Philistines (14:1). By the end of this disastrous ‘oath episode’ the whole country will have lost confidence in their king. He was conscripting young men into his army (14:52). Jonathan saw that if the men had eaten something that day the slaughter of the Philistines would have been much greater.

**2. Starving soldiers eat blood**

Saul’s foolish oath had a number of disastrous consequences. Decisions made without prayer, and without the counsel of God, often have disastrous consequences. Even when we do pray, we must do so in faith, and must patiently wait for the Lord’s answer. Do not say, ‘I prayed about it’, and then go off and do what you wanted anyway. Some young people do this when they want to marry. ‘Let not the double-minded person think they will receive anything from the Lord’ said James (James 1:7-8). And do not go ‘pressuring’ the Lord for an answer. Keep praying for sure, and confess your sins, but be very careful about swearing an oath (Mat 5:33f, James 5:12).

Saul’s foolish oath resulted in his men becoming faint and unable to carry out a greater slaughter of the Philistines. The second disastrous consequence was that starving soldiers started slaughtering sheep and oxen as soon as that day was over- at sunset. They slaughtered them on the ground and did not wait for the blood to drain before eating. Eating blood was prohibited under the Law of Moses, as everyone, including Saul, knew (Lev 17:10-14). When Saul was told, he had his aides roll a large stone in place, and the people bring their animals to be slaughtered properly throughout that night (14:33, 34). It was night because Saul’s oath prevented them for eating in the day, despite the exhaustion of the fierce battle.

To the information about Saul building an altar to the Lord, is added the comment, ‘This was the first altar that he built to the Lord’ (14:35). The implication seems to be that it was too late for Saul to be building an altar to the Lord. Other men of God like Abraham, Gideon, Samuel, and then David, built altars whenever and wherever the Lord appeared to them or saved them. If Saul was building an altar to the Lord by way of thanks for victory over the Philistines it was too late, and also an empty gesture on Saul’s part. He was always taking the glory to himself, and the Lord was not answering his prayer, as we will now see.

**3. Saul asks counsel of God**

After Jonathan’s display of faith and courage in attacking the Philistines, they all fled back to the coastal plain. Saul thought to go down at night and finish them off and collect a lot of plunder (14:36). Was he trying to salvage some glory for himself? The famished soldiers who had just been reprimanded by Saul for sinning against the Lord say, ‘Whatever!’, ‘Do whatever seems go to you’ (14:36).

The priest piped up suggesting they ‘inquire of God’. ‘So Saul asked counsel of God’, but God did not answer him (14:37). He probably had the priest get out the Urim and Thummim, but there was no answer from the Lord. Saul reasoned that some sin was stopping the Lord from answering. Was he reflecting on the sin of Achan within Joshua’s army? Some parallels with that story are found here, but we read that the Lord was with Joshua and that Joshua tore his clothes and fell down before the Lord. Do we see Saul crying out to the Lord like this? No! All Saul knows is rituals. Besides, the sin that he is about to uncover was caused by his own foolish oath, not by disobedience to a command of the Lord. It is important to distinguish between the two, between the commands of man and the commands of the Lord. Saul’s foolish oath had already brought trouble on the people; it was about to bring more trouble.

Taking another oath in the Lord’s name, Saul vows to find out who among his men had sinned. When he mentioned Jonathan’s name the people must have trembled, but Saul was unmoved: ‘Not a man among all the people answered him’ (14:39). The Lord was not talking to him, and nor were his men. We can almost feel sorry for Saul! But he presses on in his foolishness, or what has become madness, until the ‘perfect lot’ falls on Jonathan (14:40-42). Jonathan knew about his father’s oath, after the event, and openly criticised his father (14:29). He told his father,’ ‘I only tasted a little honey’, and then with incredulity said, ‘So now I must die!’ (14:43). Saul continued in his madness, repeating or maybe making more solemn his rash oath. He was intent on murdering his own son, the one who had led Israel in victory over the Philistines.

The Lord was not speaking to Saul, and nor were the people- even though he was their king. But when they saw that Saul was serious about murdering his own son they spoke up. In the name of the Lord they said, ‘No. Never!’ They knew what Jonathan had accomplished in Israel that day (14:45). The God they worshipped would not do such a terrible thing. Saul was clearly out of step with the will of God. And so Saul was prevented from murdering his own son in an act of madness arising from a foolish oath. Judgment for the broken vow, and for the sin of eating blood, will eventually fall upon Saul. What a disaster this man, the first king of Israel, proved to be, a disaster only highlighted by the faith and courage of his own son. As they returned to their homes that day, the people must have lamented the day they cried out to Samuel to give them a king like other nations.

**4. Saul’s ongoing wars**

Saul continued to reign for many years, forty years in all, but his remaining years are summarised in the few remaining verses of this chapter- apart from his ongoing downfall as David appears on the scene. What we have here is a ‘world history’ as mentioned previously. Saul went on to fight enemies on every side: Moab and Ammon to the east, Edom to the southeast, Zobah to the northeast, and the Philistines to the west. He also attacked and plundered the Amalekites to the south- more of them in the next chapter. There is no mention of the Lord giving him victory. Israel had become like the other nations. Saul conscripted strong and valiant young men into his professional army, just as Samuel had warned (14:523, 8:11). Ongoing, fierce battles with the Philistines meant there was no peace in the land during the reign of Saul.

The naming of Saul’s wife and children, along with Abner, the son of his uncle and his army commander, concludes the life and reign of Saul, king of Israel, from the world’s point of view. The biblical assessment of his reign as king continues until the end of this book. I will let a commentator called Dale Ralph Davis have the last word: ‘God reigns over history, so what matters then is not success (whether political or military) but covenant. Yahweh is not looking for winners but for disciples. Saul has begun to fail at the point of the covenant in that he did not submit to the covenant of God. And for the Bible covenant obedience matters far more than vocational achievement’.

**To obey is better than sacrifice** Text: 1Samuel 15

What do you think is the lesson of this portion of Scripture? Our title is a give-away! ‘To obey is better than sacrifice’. If you know this and do this you can switch off now! But you may find it interesting to hear the context in which this lesson is taught. Besides, you may find some of this history hard to accept; the matter of holy war, for example. And then there is the matter of God, the all-knowing and all powerful God, regretting what he has done. Didn’t God know Saul would be a failure when he chose him? If you stay switched on, we will try to answer these questions, and perhaps, get a better understanding of our great and awesome God, and of the lesson he has for us.

This chapter begins the second half of 1Samuel. The brief history of Saul’s battles, including that of an attack upon the Amalekites (14:48), concludes a ‘world history’ of Saul’s life and reign as the first king of Israel. He and his sons died in a battle with the Philistines, some forty years after he became king. It is difficult to date this attack upon the Amalekites, but if Saul was attacking David for seven years, or ten years as Brother Alex told me, clearly it was at least seven years before the end of his reign. It would appear that God had already told Saul that his dynasty was finished (13:14). Now the Lord regretfully rejects Saul as king: ‘The Lord has torn the kingdom away from you today’ (15:28). In the next chapter Samuel anoints David king of Israel (16:13).

**1. Divine judgment on the Amalekites**

Let me quote some words about holy war, in Hebrew ‘*haram*’. ‘The Hebrew word refers to setting apart of inappropriate things, usually because of defilement associated with idol worship. According to Deuteronomy 13:12-15, Israel was to destroy everyone and everything that was wicked enough to be considered defiled. Violation of this command cost Achan his life (Josh 7), and Saul his throne (15:9-11). Paul reminds us that we are all wicked, and as a result are defiled and deserve destruction. Yet God in his mercy has chosen to save those who place their trust in Jesus (Rom 3:10-26)’. These last words put you and me in the scene when it comes to God’s wrath upon sin. God set forth Jesus ‘as a propitiation by His blood, through faith’ (Rom 3:25).

The Canaanites were guilty of idolatry, so God declared judgment upon them. Joshua carried out this judgment some four hundred years later. Achan’s sin of keeping some of the devoted things resulted in the death penalty. Saul wanted the death penalty for his son when he broke Saul’s oath, but he does not seem keen on the death penalty for himself for breaking the Lord’s declaration of ‘*haram*’ upon the Amalekites.

What had the Amalekites done to deserve the wrath of God? They were a nomadic tribe, descendants of Esau, who lived in the desert to the south of Palestine. We read of them attacking God’s people as Moses led them out of Egypt (Exod 17). They attacked stragglers at the rear of the column and ‘did not fear God’ (Deut 25:18); these stragglers would have been women and children. God declared at the time that he would wipe them off the face of the earth (Exod 17:14, Deut 25:19). God may be slow to carry out judgment, but he does not forget (Exod 34:7). Some four hundred years after that divine declaration, the Lord sends Samuel to Saul, telling him to go and exterminate the Amalekites. The Kenites were related to the Midianites but were intermingling with the Amalekites- Moses married a Kenite. As Saul approached the city of Amalek he told the Kenites to move away, ‘lest I destroy you with them’, and they did (15:6).

When Samuel came to deliver the word of the Lord to Saul he reminded him that he had anointed him king of Israel, and that he was to heed the words of the Lord (15:1). The Lord’s command was clear: ‘Go and attack Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have’ (15:3); everything was devoted to Lord in this holy war of judgment. Saul gathered his troops and off he went. After the Kenites fled, Saul attacked the Amalekites, chasing and destroying them all the way to the border of Egypt.

**2. Bleating of sheep in my ears**

‘But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and oxen’ (15:9). What an ominous ‘but’ this is. They were ‘unwilling to utterly destroy them’. They Lord had given a command, but Saul thought he knew better. God’s will was to destroy everything, but Saul’s will was to keep ‘all that is good’. Saul knew better than God! Was Saul the first and last person to think he knew better than God? Eve was the first. And the last? I know lots of people who think they know better than God, including some who call themselves Christians, people who sit in judgment over the word of God. Some make graven images when God commands no graven images. Some commit adultery when God commands no adultery.

All disobedience is sin, and sin separates us from God. Saul’s disobedience brought grief to God, and to Samuel, who had anointed him king (15:1, 17). The Lord is ready to forgive sin when we repent. But did Saul truly repent? Did he realize the seriousness of his sin? We will look at the Lord’s ‘regret’ shortly (15:11). Samuel’s response to being told of Saul’s sin is variously translated as grief, troubled, and even anger; ‘He cried out to the Lord all night’ (15:11). Samuel had faithfully ministered to Saul, anointing him and giving him counsel from the Lord. And now! In the morning Samuel set out to counsel Saul once again, this time about his sin. He learned that Saul had gone to Gilgal after a seeing up a monument in his own honour along the way (15:12).

Saul came out to greet the prophet and tell him that he had done what the Lord commanded. But Samuel said, ‘What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears and the lowing of oxen which I hear?’ (15:14). With these solemn words, Samuel exposed Saul’s sin. Let these solemn words ring in our ears also, reminding us that our sin will be exposed one day- the Lord knows everything already. If we claim not to worship graven images, be careful not to carry one! If we claim to be too sick to work, be careful not to found in the shops; the same goes with regard to worship. Too often ministers feel like Samuel- very disappointed, troubled and even angry when they see those who have professed faith in Christ disobeying the Lord’s commands.

Saul is given the opportunity to repent but tries to cover up his sin. ‘A common human frailty is that we try to blame others for our sins, and when this isn’t possible we try to minimise the importance of our transgression’. Saul blamed the people, and told Samuel the animals were intended for ‘sacrifice to the Lord your God’- note ‘your’ God. Samuel told him in no uncertain terms, ‘Be quiet!’ Samuel may have been ready to listen to repentance, but not excuses and blame shifting.

Samuel had a message for Saul from the Lord. When the Lord anointed him king he was a shy and humble young man. He anointed him to rule, not like other kings, but as God’s representative and deputy. God told him to go and utterly destroy ‘the sinners, the Amalekites’ (15:18), but Saul failed to do so. By keeping plunder for himself he did ‘evil in the sight of the Lord’ (15:19).

**3. Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice**

Saul again refused to listen: ‘But I have obeyed the voice of the Lord’ (15:20). He again blames the people, saying they should have utterly destroyed the animals. But this time he admits to bringing the Amalekite king back alive. What did he intend to do with Agag? Was he some sort of proof or trophy for Saul? Samuel was not impressed. He spoke to Saul the solemn words referred to in the beginning as the lesson of this tragic episode in Saul’s life (15:22, 23). Samuel held Saul responsible for not carrying out ‘*haram*’ on the Amalekites. Saul’s sin was thinking he knew better than God, and that God should be pleased with his sacrifice- did he or the people really intend to sacrifice the animals they seized?

No matter, Saul had disobeyed the Lord’s command, and disobedience is rebellion, and rebellion is sin, the sin of divination (15:23). Divination means listening to a voice other than the Lord’s- a serious sin (Deut 18:9-12). Saul showed stubbornness in not listening to Samuel, which amounts to idolatry (15:23). In trying to justify himself, Saul was setting himself up as judge, thereby rejecting the judgment of God. He rejected the word of the Lord, and now the Lord was rejecting him as king of Israel. God’s judgment upon Saul was to remove him king.

**4. Saul repents?**

Was Saul listening to Samuel’s words of judgment upon his kingship? If so, it was with his ears only and not his heart. He says, ‘I have sinned’ but then comes up with another excuse: ‘Because I feared the people’ (15:24). First he said the people did it, and now he did it because he feared the people. Saul asked to be forgiven, but his concern was not his sin but his losing face in public; he had a reputation to maintain! The matter of sin could be dealt with some other time! ‘Let’s move on and not dwell on the matter of sin’ was Saul’s idea, and the idea of many today. ‘We all slip up and make mistakes, so get over it and move on’ they say. But God does not move on until sin is dealt with, until justice is done.

Samuel refused to go with Saul and turned to leave. Saul grabbed his robe and it tore. Samuel was quick to turn this incident into a message: ‘The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today’ (15:28). He declares to Saul, ‘The Strength/ Glory of Israel will not lie nor relent, because he is not a man’ (15:29). The Lord had spoken, first with a command and then with judgment, and he was not going to change his mind. ‘Has he said and will he not do it’ (Numb 23:19). But what if Saul was truly repenting? There was no sign of this, and his actions thus far justified his removal from office. Those given higher office will be judged more strictly (James 3:1). ‘To whom, much is given, from him much will be required’ (Luke 12:48)

Saul pleads yet again for Samuel to honour him before the elders and the people (15:30). His lips said, ‘I have sinned’, but his heart was focussed on not losing face or respect before the people. Samuel went back with Saul, but not by way of relenting or forgiving him; he went back to do what Saul was told to do. He called for the Amalekite king, whom Saul had taken alive instead of destroying in the holy war. When Agag was brought out, Samuel pronounced God’s judgment upon him, and carried out God’s judgment by killing him. In doing so the honour went to Samuel and to the Lord, not to Saul.

Samuel returned to his home in Ramah and Saul to his home in Gibeah of Saul, and Samuel had no more to do with Saul (15:34, 35). Saul was rejected as king by the Lord, and was cut off from the voice of the Lord through Samuel the prophet. But there is no sense of satisfaction in the heart of Samuel. In fact he mourned for Saul. It grieved his greatly to see ‘the Lord’s anointed’ fail to obey the word of God, and then fail to repent when confronted by his sin. Mourning is what we do when someone dies, and this was effectively what happened to Saul. Sin is something to mourn, both in ourselves and in others (James 4:9).

Samuel mourned for Saul but what about the Lord? If you read older translations, like the KJV and RSV, the word in verse 11 and 35 is ‘repent’. God cannot repent because he cannot sin, so our translation has ‘regret’ in verse 11 and 35. But how come the Lord regrets what he did when he knows and determines everything? The people, as we know, demanded a king to be like other nations and the Lord gave them their king. But Samuel was not saying, ‘I told you so’; he was mourning. The Lord was not saying, ‘I told you so’ either- but he was regretting having made Saul king. Saul was not a puppet; he was a man responsible to the Lord for his actions, just like us.

The Lord is never glad to see anyone disobey his command, and never glad to punish them for doing so (cf. Gen 6:6). Out of love he gives commands, and out of love he punishes if he has to in order to remain righteous and just.

**The Lord looks on the heart** Text: 1Samuel 16

Saul, the first king of Israel, rejected the word of the Lord so the Lord rejected him as king (15:23). Saul’s anointing came about because the people rejected the Lord as their King (8:7). They got the king they deserved, a king who failed to trust and obey the Lord, a king who turned out to be like kings of other nations. When Samuel walked away from Saul he was left without the counsel of the Lord. Here in chapter 16 we read that, ‘The Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul’ (16:14 cf. 11:6). There is irony in all directions as we read the story of Samuel, especially in this chapter which describes the decline of Saul, and the rise of David.

When Saul made a sinful sacrifice, Samuel reprimanded him for being foolish and disobeying the command of the Lord. At that time the Lord declared his dynasty finished, and, ‘The Lord has sought for Himself a man after his own heart’ (13:14). When Saul again disobeyed the Lord’s command, in failing to utterly destroy the Amalekites, the Lord declared his own reign as king finished: ‘The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you and has given it to a neighbour of yours, who is better than you’ (15:28). Little did we know this ‘neighbour’ would be a young man that Saul brought into his own house!

Here in the second half of the book of 1Samuel, the focus turns to this man who is ‘better than’ Saul, namely David. Saul’s decline is mirrored by the rise of David, not independently but under the one roof- for a time. As Saul’s jealous madness grows, so does the danger faced by David. His introduction to kingship was by no means a smooth transition from shepherding sheep to shepherding the people of God. This chapter falls neatly into two parts, the first being the Lord’s choosing of David, and the second Saul’s choosing of David.

**1. David chosen by God**

This chapter begins with a familiar, ‘now’, which gives no indication as to time, but the words, ‘How long will you mourn for Saul’ point to the passing of some time since the rejection of Saul as king, detailed in the previous chapter. ‘Samuel mourned for Saul, and the Lord regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel’ (15:35). The Lord punished Saul for his unrepented sin, and was moving on in His divine plan of redemption. Saul would live and reign for years to come, but the Lord had already chosen his replacement. Samuel, on the other hand, was till mourning for Saul. Was this because they had become friends, or that Saul’s failure was in some way Samuel’s failure? Or was it because Samuel hated sin and hated seeing sin destroy Saul. Indeed, the downfall of the king threatened the whole nation. Israel now had a king ruling without the counsel of the Lord.

While there is nothing wrong with mourning or pondering over what might have been, we must not become despondent or start losing hope. Let us never put our hope in a man. Saul was finished, but God was still on the throne and ruling over the nation. He had saved his people out of Egypt for a purpose, and that purpose would be fulfilled. From this nation, and from the tribe of Judah in particular, would come the Saviour of the world. Saul as a Benjaminite was somewhat of a diversion anyway. With David, the son of Jesse, a Bethlehemite, we come to the tribe of Judah of whom it is written, ‘The sceptre shall not depart from Judah’ (Gen 49:10). We have the book of Ruth to thank for giving us the genealogy of Jesse back to Perez, the son of Judah- and Matthew chapter 1 of course!

Looking to the future, the Lord told Samuel to fill his horn with oil and go to Bethlehem and find Jesse, ‘for I have provided/ seen Myself a king among his sons’ (16:1). The Hebrew word ‘*ra’ah*’ meaning ‘see’ features in this chapter (like the word ‘voice’ in the previous chapter). The Lord had seen and chosen for himself a new king, man after his own heart. But Saul was still ruling and Samuel was understandably afraid of going to anoint a new king. The Lord told him to take a heifer with him; he would go as priest as well as prophet. The elders of Bethlehem thought he was coming as judge. They trembled when Samuel showed up in their town, but again, the heifer showed he had come in peace to make a sacrifice to the Lord.

The Lord told Samuel what to do when he got to Bethlehem. He was to prepare the sacrifice and invite Jesse to come along with the elders. Remember his anointing of Saul at a sacrifice in Ramah. Samuel told the elders to sanctify themselves and make themselves ritually clean before coming to the sacrifice; ritual washing was part of this sanctification or making holy. Jesse and his sons had to do the same because Samuel invited them to his sacrifice also. Samuel personally supervised their consecration or sanctification (16:5).

When Samuel saw Eliab, the eldest of Jesse’s sons, he said to himself, ‘Surely the Lord’s anointed is before Him!’ (16:6). The eldest son was usually seen as the future head of the family. Moreover, it appears that Eliab was tall and strong, as well as handsome. Was Samuel remembering Saul, who was a head taller than anyone else (9:2)? If so, the Lord had a lesson for Samuel, and for us still today. Can you recall a time when you were impressed, even blown away, by someone’s physical appearance? Was it your spouse? I hope so! But we warn young people to look further than physical appearance- don’t we? We have a saying, ‘Don’t judge a book by its cover’.

This chapter, and verse 7 in particular, is all about seeing. Samuel saw Eliab as tall and handsome. He was attractive to women, no doubt, and Samuel thought him princely also. But the Lord said, ‘no’, and rejected him. Now comes the lesson. Firstly, the negatives: ‘The Lord does not see as man sees’. How does man see? ‘Man sees the outward appearance’. This is how men and women are evaluated in our society, although beauty contests, as such, are not so popular nowadays. But young people seem more focussed on physical appearance than ever.

Yet we have ears as well as eyes. We can listen to what people say, and even with our eyes we can see what people do and not just appearances. Some are able to deceive us, at least for a time, but no one can deceive the Lord because, ‘The Lord looks on the heart’ (16:7). We are not able to see people’s hearts, but the Lord can. The first lesson is for us to realise that the Lord sees our hearts. The second is for us not to focus on outward appearance when evaluating someone for a relationship or a job. If we ask the Lord, he will help us to know something of what is in their heart.

Samuel learned the lesson. No longer did he say, ‘Surely this is the Lord’s anointed’. Eliab was rejected. Next came Abinadab, and Samuel said, ‘no’, because he was waiting upon the Lord. Shammah came and again it was, ‘no’. Seven sons were brought and Samuel said, ‘no’ to each one. What now? There was a little brother but he was keeping the sheep (16:11). The littlest brother, given the simplest job, was brought to Samuel. The Lord commanded Samuel to anoint this boy king of Israel. He did this before those present at the sacrifice. David was bright eyed, with a ruddy or reddish completion (16:12). He is described as good looking, but this was not why the Lord chose him. People with good hearts can be good looking also- as I complemented my wife when I married her!

‘The Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward’ (16:13). This was confirmation that David was called to be king. Samuel had done what the Lord had asked, so he went home. This will be the last we hear of Samuel until his death in chapter 25. The presence of the Holy Spirit did not mean an easy life for David. He would spend years fleeing Saul’s jealous attacks before becoming king. Jesus, as we know, spent his life fleeing the jealous attacks of Jewish leaders. But still, the Spirit of the Lord is our guarantee that we belong to the Lord (2Cor 1:22, 5:2).

**2. David chosen by Saul**

Is it irreverent to say that the Lord has a sense of humour? It is certainly ironic, if not humorous, to now read of the newly anointed king being chosen by the rejected king to come and serve him! Those who love Shakespeare, or a good movie, should try reading the Bible. This history is for our learning not just entertainment, of course. The transition from verse 13 to 14 could not be more stark or tragic as we read, ‘The Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul’. The Spirit was given to various people at various times in the OT, unlike the NT under the new covenant when the Holy Spirit is poured out on all believers. David was now the Lord’s chosen instrument to carry out His will with regard the people of God. It is interesting that David himself said when he sinned, ‘Do not take your Holy Spirit from me’ (Ps 51:11). Saul was no longer listening to the Lord so the presence of His Spirit was redundant.

God removed his Spirit and sent another spirit, a distressing spirit, to trouble Saul (16:14). The tragic downfall of Saul deepens. Some translate as ‘evil spirit’, but we should not start thinking of this in NT terms. Jesus was powerful to cast out evil spirits but is never said to send an evil spirit upon anyone; we do read of Satan entering Judas (Luke 22:3). The Lord was punishing Saul, stripping him of his kingship, and now sending a distressing or terrorising spirit upon him. ‘Saul’s disobedience continued to be punished by the assaults of an evil spirit. Saul’s increasing tendencies to despondency, jealousy and violence were no doubt occasioned by his knowledge of his rejection as king, but an evil spirit was also involved in these psychological aberrations’. Saul later became afraid of David, knowing that the Lord was with David and not with him (18:12).

But, for now, the presence of a distressing spirit from the Lord disturbed Saul’s sleep and general behaviour. His servants noticed this and suggested he get a musician to come and play the harp by way of therapy. Music, as we know, can affect our mood. Even as we sing praises to the Lord our hearts are lifted up. Other music may also lift us up, while some music is dark and disturbing. I don’t know if psychologists prescribe music therapy- they are more likely to prescribe drugs- but Saul’s servants prescribed calming music when Saul’s soul was troubled (16:16).

Saul agreed with their advice and told his servants to find a man who could play the harp well (16:17). And, surprise, surprise, one servant recommended a son of Jesse called David. It is interesting that this recommendation includes other aspects of David’s character and ability. He not only plays the harp well but is, ‘a mighty man of valour, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a handsome person; and the Lord is with him’ (16:18). This servant was either making David’s CV look good, or was displaying skills of prophecy. Whichever it was, he described David’s character and abilities perfectly. The truth that the Lord was with him did not concern Saul at this point in time (cf.18:12).

Saul again took the advice of his servant and sent a message to Jesse to send his son David to the palace (16:19). Note the irony- David was ‘with the sheep’, ‘and Jesse took a donkey and loaded it …’ (16:19, 20). Saul was a keeper of donkeys when he was anointed king. Jesse was pleased to see the king choose his son to come and serve him; nothing was said about David having been anointed king. ‘So David came to Saul and stood before him’ (16:21). Again, note the irony: ‘He loved him greatly, and he became his armour-bearer’ (16:21). An armour-bearer had to be most trustworthy. Saul’s love for David would soon turn to hatred, bitter, jealous hatred. The most loved would become the most hated. David’s greater Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, would experience the same fickleness of men during the last week of his earthly life.

The initial request for David to come and play soothing music was followed by a request for him to stay on in the palace. Was it just David’s music that refreshed Saul’s soul when he was present? Or was David’s presence itself a blessing to the rejected and troubled king? As the greater Son of David, Jesus does not refresh souls with sweet music but his presence certainly refreshes our souls. As David found favour in Saul’s sight (16:22), may the Lord Jesus find favour in your sight. Have you invited him into your troubled life?

**Voice of faith**  Text: 1Samuel 17:1-27

What was the first Bible story you told your child? I hope you tell your children or grandchildren Bible stories! Judging by what I see in the book store, Noah’s Ark seems to be the most popular, but David and Goliath is up there among the most popular. In the German town of Regensburg which we visited on our recent holiday, I saw a huge mural depicting David and Goliath- it was on Goliath Street!

If you have read your children the story of David and Goliath, what did you tell them was the moral of the story? Many love this story because the little guy wins over the big guy; they say the lesson is, ‘Don’t be afraid of giants in your life’. ‘Just as little David overcame Goliath, so you can overcome that bully at school’- is this what we teach? As our title suggests, and as we read in the Bible, this story is not just about being brave; it about trusting in God. It is not simply a story about a boy facing a giant; it is a story about a boy, a giant, and God.

After King Saul disobeyed the Lord, and failed to repent, Samuel told him that the Lord had rejected him as king and chosen another, ‘who is better than you’ (15:28). Unknown to Saul, Samuel went and anointed David, the son of Jesse, as king. The Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul and came upon David. Ironically, Saul brought David into his palace to play the harp whenever his mind was disturbed. We learn here in chapter 17 that David sometimes returned to his home in Bethlehem (17:15).

Chapter 17 begins, ‘Now the Philistines gathered their armies together’. This is the only detail of the passage of time. But the writer does give specific details of geography. The Philistines, as we know, lived on the coastal plain, from where they periodically raided Israel. Saul’s son, Jonathan, led Israel in victory in the last recorded battle between these two nations. This time the Philistines came with a new recruit from the city of Gath, Goliath. They came up the valley of Elah, some 24 km west of Bethlehem. Saul went with his army to repel this incursion. The Philistines were on one side of the valley at Sochoh, and Saul was on the other side with his men; the valley was between them (17:1-3).

The Philistines had horses and chariots, which were

 deadly on the plains but useless in the hills. Fighting in the hills was a man to man affair. In this case, the Philistines wanted to make the battle a single man to man affair. It was not uncommon in those days for a war to be determined by a fight between two men; such a fight was seen as determining the will of god. Goliath is called a ‘champion’ which in Hebrew means ‘a man between two (armies)’. The Philistines were super-confident of victory because they had a giant to fight the best soldier in Israel. Let us look at, and listen to, this giant called Goliath, and then look at, and listen to, the boy called David.

**1. Goliath**

The Philistine’s champion, Goliath from Gath, was over 3m or 9ft tall. That is a metre taller than me. He would have had trouble standing up in my house, let along getting through the doorways. It seems he was not just tall but also big and strong. He came out from the Philistine camp wearing almost 60kg of metal armour in the form of a helmet, a coat of mail, and leg guards. He carried a huge spear with an iron spearhead. Goliath appeared invincible to everyone- except David, as we will see.

Goliath was tall and strong and loud, very loud. He came out and yelled across the valley to the Israelites. He boasted of his own race and belittled the Israelites, the servants of Saul. He challenged them to find someone to fight him (17:8). The rule of the ‘game’ was that if one of Saul’s men killed him the whole Philistine army would surrender, but if he, Goliath, killed Saul’s man then Israel would become servants to the Philistines (17:9). As mentioned, such terms were not unusual and Israel seems to have accepted this deal.

When Saul and his men heard the boasting of this Philistine giant they trembled in fear. You will recall that Saul himself was a head taller than anyone else (9:2); he was the obvious choice to go and fight Goliath but the Spirit of God had departed from him (cf.11:6). Saul was just as scared as everyone else- except David, as we will see.

Although battles were seen in theological terms in those days, there is no mention of God or gods up to this point. But the final words of the Philistine giant in this challenge are: ‘I defy the armies of Israel this day’ (17:10). The word translated ‘defy’, or ‘mock’, or ‘deride’, is a feature of Goliath’s challenge. David correctly saw that this defiance was directed at the God of Israel (17:26).

**2. David**

The writer now tells us about David, about how he came to be in the Israelite camp, and his reaction to the defiant words of Goliath. We know about David’s family and his position in that family already, but as important background to the story this information is repeated. In fact, you may have thought David had gone to reside in Saul’s palace but this was not the whole story; he went home to Bethlehem on occasion to feed his father’s sheep (17:15).

David was the youngest son of Jesse, an Ephrathite of Bethlehem (17:12). Seven older sons had been passed over by Samuel when it came to anointing a new king. The three eldest sons were in the army and had gone with Saul to engage the Philistines in the Valley of Elah. The names of these sons are again given as Eliab, Abinadab and Shammah (17:13).

After forty days at the front, Jesse’s sons were in need of supplies. Although Jesse was taxed by the king, it was still incumbent upon him to supply his fighting sons with food. So Jesse called David from shepherding the sheep to go and ‘shepherd’ his brothers- or at least to give them food. His father sent him off to the Israelite camp with dried grain, ten loaves of bread, and ten cheeses (17: 17, 18). He was to give these supplies to the ‘captain of a thousand’, and bring back news of his brother’s welfare. Dutiful David did as he was told and arrived at the camp just as the army was assembling for battle.

Every day, morning and evening, they assembled to listen to the tirade of the Philistine giant. Leaving the supplies with the keeper of supplies, David rushed off to find his brothers (17:22). He saw Goliath coming out and challenging the Israelites to send a man to fight him. Moreover, David heard the words used by Goliath in this challenge (17:23). He saw the men of Israel flee in fear when Goliath appeared and roared his challenge to Saul and his army.

How quickly Saul and his men forgot the victories the Lord had given them over the Ammonites, the Amalekites, and indeed over the Philistines through Jonathan’s prayerful advance- not to mention Moses and the destruction of the Egyptian army in the sea. As a believer, I am sure the Lord has given you many victories in life; have you forgotten these? What about the victory you have in the Lord Jesus Christ over sin and death? Have you forgotten this? Is this why you do not call upon the Lord when you face giants in your life?

**3. The living God**

As David stood watching and listening to Goliath, the men of Israel standing with him explained what was going on (17:25). They also told David of Saul’s promise to reward the man who volunteered to fight the Philistine giant; as things stood, Saul was not about to lose anything with this promise! With a sense of futility, the men told David that the man who killed Goliath would be rewarded with great riches, with Saul’s daughter in marriage, and with a tax-free future for his father’s house (17; 25). Marrying the king’s daughter would mean a meteoric rise in social status for any man. A tax-free future was also tempting. We were told that in Hungary, where the population is decreasing, women who have four or more children are exempt from tax for the rest of their life!

For the first time in this chapter we hear David speak: ‘Then David spoke to the men who stood by him’ (17:26). He asked for clarification regarding what he had just been told, more by way of introduction than serious interest in a reward. His concern was for the reproach being direct toward Israel and Israel’s God. ‘He might appear to be self-serving. But according to the narrative, David is chiefly motivated by righteous indignation’. Goliath was not just mocking the Israelites, he was mocking the God of Israel. David did not see Goliath as an unbeatable giant; he saw him as an ‘uncircumcised Philistine’ defying the armies of the living God (17:26).

Wars between nations were seen as wars between the nation’s gods. Saul and the Israelites had forgotten their God, the almighty God who had delivered them in the past, and who lived to deliver them today and into the future. But David had not forgotten his God. He had not forgotten that God is a jealous God who will not give his glory to another. The defiant words of the uncircumcised Philistine offended David and offended his God. David knew, as we know, that ‘man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever’ (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q 1). God is powerful to defend himself of course, but sometimes he uses his people to defend or promote his glory. David asked about the reward promised by Saul but his chief concern was for the glory of God and God’s name.

We previously saw Jonathan, David’s brother in the faith, step out in faith to confront the Philistines: ‘Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; it may be that the Lord will work for us. For nothing restrains the Lord from saving by many or by few’ (14:6). David uses similar words as he demonstrates the same faith, faith in the only true and living God. It was a personal faith; like Jonathan, he was ready to put his faith into action, even risking his life for the glory of God. What are you prepared to risk in order to promote the glory of God?

We know the outcome of David’s stepping out to defend the glory of God, but let us pause to consider the thoughts of David at this time. If Saul and his big brothers had no chance against the giant, what chance did David have? In worldly terms, none! From a worldly perspective David had no chance, but David’s thinking went beyond the worldly. By faith he saw the desperate situation from God’s perspective, and nothing is impossible for God. He would have said with the apostle Paul, ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me’ (Phil 4:13).

Do you have such faith? Are you able to see beyond the immediate problem, whatever it may be, trusting in the God who rules over the universe, over the nations, and over all people? Do you believe in his love, and his power to deliver you? Moreover, are you concerned for his glory? Many Christians are concerned for their own well-being and glory but not for the glory of God in the way we learn from David.

Let me close by quoting words written by Dale Ralph Davis: ‘David’s question is not a magic charm for solving every problem; but surely it instructs us. It shows us how crucial it is that we hold the right starting point, that we raise the right question at the very first. All the believer’s life and all the church’s life requires theocentric thinking. The tragedy is that were someone to hear our thoughts and words in our dangers and troubles they would never guess that we had a *living* God’.

**Victory of faith**  Text: 1Samuel 17:28-58

We pick up this well-known story of David and Goliath with David at the frontline with his brothers. King Saul had led the army of Israel to the western border where the Philistines had gathered to invade Israel - yet again. The Philistines remain as a thorn in the side of Israel after Joshua’s army destroyed the other tribes and settled in Canaan. Before Saul was made king they actually defeated Israel and captured the Ark of the Covenant. But when their god, Dagon, came crashing down before the presence of the ark, they wisely decided to return it (5:4). They seem to have forgotten how heavily the hand of the Lord struck them at that time- and tragically the Israelites has also forgotten the power of God to deliver them- except the boy David.

David saw a giant called Goliath come out of the Philistine camp mocking the armies of Israel as he called for someone to come and fight him. Everyone, including Saul, ran in fear as this giant boasted and mocked the Israelites and their God. Yes, David saw Goliath’s boasting as defying the God of Israel. His mocking words aroused righteous indignation in David’s heart; he was concerned for the glory of God.

David voiced this faith in verse 26, and more extensively in his interaction with King Saul. We will see that this faith led to action and indeed victory; hence our title, ‘Victory of faith’. But faith will be tested. Our first subheading, ‘Criticised by big brother’ sees such testing. Our second subheading is, ‘Call aside by Saul’, our third, ‘Confronting Goliath’, and finally, ‘Killing Goliath’.

**1. Criticism by big brother**

At the frontline and the ‘standoff’ battle, David saw Goliath come forward and shout his defiant words. He asked what was going on and some soldiers told him. When his eldest brother came along he got angry with David, telling him in no uncertain terms to mind his own business and get back to minding the sheep (17:28). In words reminiscent of Joseph’s older brothers, he told David he was a proud and insolent fellow. Eliab, a tall, strong man, had been passed over by Samuel when David was anointed. His anger towards David was jealous anger, not righteous anger.

David was understandably taken aback by his brother’s sharp criticism. He pleaded innocence: ‘What have I done?’ (17:29). But David was not deterred; he went on to ask others what was going on. David did not cower before his brother. He had done no wrong. In fact, he was acting out of jealously himself, jealousy for the glory of God.

Eliab’s words to David are not unlike those we will hear from the Philistine. David’s faith would be tested within his own family and among his own people. A believer’s faith is often tested within his or her family, or even within the church. A person converting out of Islam or Hinduism, or a secular family, often faces criticism and condemnation from the family. A believer who feels called by the Lord to a particular ministry may face criticism and opposition within their own church; William Carey faced such a test when he first spoke of his desire to take the gospel, to the heathen. Besides, our Lord Jesus faced criticism from one of his disciples when he spoke of what lay ahead for him in the cross and the resurrection (Mat 16:21-23).

**2. Called aside by Saul**

When David’s questioning and words about the ‘uncircumcised Philistine defying the armies of the living God’ were reported to Saul, Saul called him (17:31). Saul must have been surprised by the encouraging words of this boy. Did Saul recognise his harp-playing therapist? Later questions about the identity of his father do not prove that he didn’t (17:55, 58).

David went further than encouraging words; he offered to ‘go and fight with this Philistine’ (17:32). Saul only saw a boy or youth standing before him, but we recall the words of the Lord: ‘Man looks at the outward appearance but the Lord looks on the heart’ (16:7). We see a living faith in David’s heart, faith that drove him to action. Remember, ‘Faith without works is dead’ (James 2:20). David is remembered, along with Samuel, as a man of faith in Hebrews 11:32; the words, ‘out of weakness made strong’ and ‘became valiant in battle’ could be applied to David (Heb 11:34).

David’s faith was based upon what he knew of the Lord his God. He knew from the Scriptures about Abraham and Moses. But he also knew from personal experience that the Lord was powerful to deliver him from wild beasts. Goliath will mock David for thinking he is just a dog (17:43). Ironically, David is already comparing this Philistine to wild beasts (cf. Ps 22). This Philistine was attacking God’s sheep. David reminds Saul that as a shepherd boy he had pursued lions and bears, killing them while rescuing the lamb they had taken. David believed he could do the same to ‘this uncircumcised Philistine’ who had ‘defied the armies of the living God’ (17:36 cf. vs26).

David had not killed lions and bears in his own strength; the Lord gave him the strength to do so (17:37). David’s faith was not in his own strength or ability but in the Lord, in the living and almighty God. In faith he told King Saul, ‘He will deliver me from the hand of the Philistine’ (17:37). Saul was persuaded, referring to the Lord himself in a rather ritualistic manner.

A somewhat comical scene is depicted as Saul gives David his own armour to put on (17:38). It is much too big and heavy of course; ‘so David took them off’ (17:39). While comical, it is also ironic that little David does what big Saul appeared more able to do, but lacked the faith the do so. David took his staff, and chose five smooth stones from the creek to put in his shepherd’s bag. He carried his sling in his hand. These stones are reckoned to be larger than a cricket ball. We sadly know how deadly a cricket ball can be. Goliath had a bronze helmet which gave less protection than a cricket helmet.

**3. Confronts Goliath**

The battle between a shepherd boy and a giant is about to begin. While this is the focus of story books, do not forget what we have just heard from David. He knew the Lord could deliver him because he had delivered him from lions and bears. He believed the Lord would deliver him because this Philistine was mocking or blaspheming God’s name. Under the law, blasphemy was punished by death, stoning to death (Zeph 2:8-11). We are not called to stone blasphemers, but we are called to warn them from God’s word. How often does the Lord punish blasphemers himself? (cf. Acts 5:1-10).

Prior to any stones being thrown, we find the Philistine ranting and raving and mocking this child of God. When he saw David he despised him as just a boy with a stick: ‘Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks?’ (17:43). ‘And the Philistine cursed David by his gods’. Again beasts are referred to, this time with the Philistine threatening to feed David’s carcass to the birds and the beasts. The Philistine was full of confidence, not doubting for a moment that he would kill David.

Satan makes our enemies very bold. He fills their mouths with lots of abusive words- which the Lord hears. And remember, the ungodly only see situations from a worldly perspective whereas you, I trust, see situations from a heavenly perspective. The Psalmist reminds us again and again not to trust in horses and chariots but to trust in the Lord, while Paul tells us not to put our confidence in carnal weapons but in God (Ps 20:7, 33:17, 2Cor 10:4, 5).

David’s words to the Philistine are as profound as his faith. In verse 45 he explains the situation from God’s perspective; he gives a reason for the hope that is in him (1Peter 3:15). He saw the Philistines sword and spear but declared, ‘I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied’ (17:45). This was spiritual warfare and David knew his God was powerful to deliver. He told the Philistines, and all who we watching, that the Lord would deliver Goliath into his hand. It would be David taking off the head this Philistine and feeding his carcass to the birds and wild beasts, not the other way around. And why? ‘That all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel’ (17:46).

The impending battle was not about David or Goliath. It was about the Lord and his glory. In fact, everything is about God and his glory still today! Whatever you do, do you do it to the glory of God? Too many Christians are doing things for their own glory and therefore face problems in the same way as non-Christians, namely in their own strength. When we do things for the glory of God, we will now the blessing of God, indeed the victory that only God can give. David’s situation was hopeless; everyone was laughing at him. But in God’s strength he prevailed, not for his glory but for the glory of God; that all those assembled, both Jew and Gentile, would know that ‘the Lord does not save with sword or spear’ (17:47). ‘Not by might nor by power but by my Spirit says the Lord of hosts’ (Zech 4:6).

There is no mention of David being rewarded with riches, although he is later given Saul’s daughter in marriage. With regard to taxes, Saul seems to fear his promise was rather rash. When he saw David going to fight Goliath he asked Abner, ‘Whose son is this youth?’ (17:55). Abner did not know, so was told to find out whose son this young man was (17:56). The promise was to his father’s house, so if this house was large Saul stood to lose a lot of tax. After the battle David was brought to Saul and told him that his father was Jesse of Bethlehem (17:58). Not much praise for a young man who had just saved the nation!

**4. Kills Goliath**

If Saul had gone to fight Goliath, the fight might have lasted a few rounds at least. With little David going to fight the Philistine giant, no one expected a second round. Everyone, except David, expected a quick victory for the giant. There was a quick victory, but it was not a victory for the giant with his sword and spear and all the rest. He even had an armour-bearer carrying his shield before him (17:41).

After all the boasting of the Philistine, and the confidence of faith expressed by David, the fight began- although not really. David was still some distance away, but within range for his sling, when he took a stone out of his bag, put it in his sling and hurled it at high speed towards the Philistine- just as he had done with lions and bears. Yes, David was a good sling shot but the Lord guided this stone to a gap in Goliath’s armour, to a point on his forehead where the stone sank in and, ‘he fell on his face to the earth’ (17:49). This was more than a knock-out blow- it killed him! Some readers find it a problem that Goliath was killed twice (17:50, 51). While on the ground, David took the Philistine’s sword and cut off his head; he had no sword of his own. David did this to prove he was dead, and to take his enemy’s head as a trophy, as was the custom.

Seeing Goliath’s head separated from the rest his body, the Philistines started fleeing down the valley back to their homes. The Israelite soldiers gave chase and slaughtered them all the way to Ekron and Gath, two Philistine cities. Returning in victory, the Israelites plundered the tents left behind by the Philistines. David had his trophy, the head of the Philistine giant, which he took with him to Jerusalem- although he was yet to capture this city (2Sam 5:6-12). He also took his armour, including the sword of the Philistine giant, which ended up in the tabernacle of the Lord (21:9).

The actual fight between David and Goliath was somewhat of an anti-climax. Like many events in the Bible, including the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, it was foretold- the outcome, however unlikely, was not in doubt for men or women of faith. For David the battle was the Lord’s, and the Lord he knew was all powerful to deliver even in the face of impossible odds. Do you believe the Lord is powerful to deliver you- even from sin and death?

**‘And David his tens of thousands’** Text: 1Samuel 18

Rome was a republic ruled by a senate; that was until Julies Caesar made himself emperor. The people did not vote for him, but gave him popular support after his military success in the Gallic wars. He made himself dictator for life, but was assassinated within the year. After Caesar, prospective emperors increased their popularity by waging war on some neighbouring country. Winning a war became the way to popularity and power. Putin must have read Roman history, but seems not to have contemplated losing a war!

King Saul was chosen by God, but victory over his enemies on every side made him popular with the people (14:47). That was until he disobeyed the Lord’s command and Samuel told him the Lord had torn the kingdom of Israel from him, and the Lord took His Spirit from Saul (15:25, 16:14). Only David’s family knew that Samuel had anointed David king, with the Spirit of the Lord coming upon him. Saul called David to his palace to play music whenever ‘a distressing spirit from the Lord troubled him’ (16:14).

One day the Philistine army gathered to attack Israel and Saul gathered his army to repel them. But the Philistines had a ‘champion’ called Goliath; not even Saul the king was ready to take on this giant. But a shepherd boy called David came along, and in the strength of the Lord killed Goliath. So the Philistines were defeated, and Saul led his troops home in victory. David was of course, a hero in the eyes of the people, and especially in the eyes of Jonathan, Saul’s son. Jonathan was himself a hero, having himself led in a previous victory over the Philistines (14:6). Jonathan is not mentioned in the ‘Goliath battle’, but he appears here in chapter 18 to make a ‘blood-brother’ covenant with David. Our subheadings in chapter 18 are: ‘Adoration of Saul’s son’, ‘Anger of Saul’, Adoration of Saul’s daughter’ and, ‘Afraid even more’.

**1. Adoration of Saul’s son**

Why did Jonathan become one of David’s fans? He was more than a fan; he made a covenant with David to be his faithful friend for ever. Did he see and hear David sharing the same faith in the Lord that he had (14:6, 17:45)? He was not to know of David’s anointing, but somehow senses that David was to be the next king. Such a sense should have made him jealous of David, but it didn’t. Are we attributing more to Jonathan’s motivation than is said in the text? Jonathan does actually speak in the text, but his actions ‘speak louder than words’.

King Saul did not exactly heap praise on David after he killed Goliath, but he did call him in to talk about his father; remember Saul promised to give his own daughter in marriage to the man who killed Goliath, and to exempt his father’s house from all taxes. Saul took David to stay in his palace full time, not allowing him to come and go from Jesse’s house (18:2, cf. 17:15). Saul put David in charge of at least one unit of his army. Everyone, including the servants and officers in the army, were pleased to have David in charge because he acted wisely (18:5, 14, and 15). David was not ambitious or self- seeking. He was loyal to the king, going wherever Saul sent him. He was a humble and obedient servant, and the king was pleased with him until…

Back to the king’s son, Jonathan, for a moment. ‘Jonathan loved David as his own soul, and the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David’ (18:1). They became soul mates, nothing more and nothing less; David speaks of Jonathan’s love ‘surpassing the love of a woman’ (2Sam 1:26). They trusted each other like brothers. We know the strength of blood relationships; would that we knew more of the strength of spiritual relationships! How sad that people who have worked together in ministry for years can have a falling out and cease all contact! Jonathan’s faith in the Lord allowed him, indeed led him, to make a covenant or binding agreement to be David’s friend forever.

How glad we are that the covenant Jesus made with us in his own blood is a binding agreement or commitment, in which he says, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you’ (Heb 13:7). What a joy it was to hear the closing words of Romans 8 referred to in funeral service of our queen; ‘Nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom 8:39). We can point to Jonathan as a ‘type’ of Christ in this making of a covenant with David, even if it is David who becomes the actual ancestor of Jesus Christ.

In a selfless act of love, an act declaring David to more important than himself (Rom 12:19), Jonathan took off his royal robe and gave it to David (18:4). Sharing is one thing; giving of one’s life is another (1John 3:16). In giving David his armour, including his sword, his bow and his belt, Jonathan was giving David his inheritance (18:4). These items of clothing and armour would have been ceremonially presented to Jonathan as the future king of Israel, but here we see him giving these to David in a selfless act of love. This was not a ‘spur of the moment’ act of love, like lots of acts of love today. It was considered covenant love which involved vows, maybe the cutting of an animal in half and passing between the halves; covenants were literally ‘cut’, not ‘made’.

**2. Anger of Saul**

Saul’s palace was a place of love and harmony, until Saul started reflecting on his homecoming after the defeat of Goliath and the Philistines. Only men went off to war in those days; women stayed home with the children, praying for their husbands or sons to return safely. My mother was such a person, as are the women of Ukraine at the present time. When the men return in victory, the women come out to welcome them. From all the towns of Israel the women came out, ‘singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with joy, and with musical instruments’ (18:6). It was a joyous homecoming for all the people of Israel.

Some women had composed their own song as they welcomed the men home with singing and dancing. In songs, as in poems, we have what is called ‘poetic licence’ in structures like rhyme and hyperbole. News about David’s killing of Goliath had reached the homes of Israel, but it was their king who they welcomed first: ‘Saul has killed his thousands’ (18:7). They had no idea how many Philistines Saul had killed, or how many David had killed, apart from Goliath. But in their song they spoke of Saul killing ‘thousands’ and David his ‘ten thousands’. No one took any notice of the ‘poetic’ numbers, except Saul.

When he heard them attributing a greater number to David, he flew into a rage: ‘Then Saul was very angry’ (18:8). In his hard and jealous heart, he reasoned that the next thing David and the people would be calling for would be for David to be king- a nation can have only one king! Saul was a very disturbed man after the Spirit of God left him. He was no longer a confident soldier or ruler. He was anxious and jealous, and often confused a ‘wreck of a man’ we might say. ‘So Saul kept a jealous eye on David from that day forward’ (18:9).

What happened the next day? Saul was having another of his ‘episodes’ when a distressing spirit from God came upon him. He ‘prophesied’ or made ecstatic utterances in the house, so David was called to play music as usual. Saul had a spear in his hand, but David had no reason to worry about this- not until Saul suddenly threw his spear at David, hoping to pin him to the wall (18:11). David avoided the spear, not once but twice, we read. Ironically, it was Saul who was afraid of David, not David of Saul (18:12). David had nothing against Saul before or after this attack. Besides, he trusted in the Lord and ‘the Lord was with him’, but had departed from Saul (18:12). We know what was in Saul’s mind and what was in his heart, even if David didn’t!

In jealous anger and fear towards David, Saul had him taken out and put in charge of an army unit, apparently hoping the Philistines would do with David what he was failing to do. But David went out and came back unhurt. Again we note two aspects of David’s success: firstly, he behaved wisely, with wisdom from above as James says (James 3:17), and secondly, ‘the Lord was with him’ (18:14). In terms of priority, we should reverse these two: the Lord was with David and he acted wisely. Saul’s plan to get rid of David with ‘clean hands’ was backfiring. All the people loved David because of his wise behaviour, while Saul became more afraid of David.

**3. Adoration of Saul’s daughter**

Saul had promised the man who killed Goliath to his daughter in marriage (17:25). After being consumed with jealous anger towards David, Saul remembered his promise, not as a reward but as a way to trap David. He offered his eldest daughter in marriage if David would ‘serve him bravely and fight the Lord’s battles’, and hopefully get killed by the Philistines while doing so (18:17). David protested that he was not worthy to become Saul’s son-in-law; as it turned out, this girl was already married.

Saul had a second daughter called Michal, who actually loved David; the feeling was mutual it appears. Saul was delighted to hear this, so through his servants he arranged for David to marry Michal. But Saul, as we know, was bent on destroying David, so he demanded a costly and strange dowry or bride-price. David may have remembered Jacob working for clever Laban, not just seven but fourteen years, to get Rachel’s hand in marriage. Saul demanded David do something even more costly -potentially- than seven years work; he told David to bring him one hundred Philistine foreskins. David had again protested that he was unworthy to become the king’s son-in-law, but he accepted this challenge as a way of ‘earning’ Michal’s hand in marriage (18:23, 26). Saul’s plan was for David to get killed by the Philistines while trying to fulfil this gruesome demand.

David went off with his men to kill one hundred Philistines for their foreskins within the allotted time. As it turned out, he brought not one hundred but two hundred Philistine foreskins back for King Saul to count. We can only imagine Saul’s anger at seeing David return in one piece, and with two hundred Philistine foreskins for him to count, while David looked on! Saul had no option but to then give his daughter Michal in marriage to David.

**4. Afraid even more**

‘Thus Saul saw and knew that the Lord was with David’ (18:28). Talk about blindness! Saul was a slow learner, or more to the point, was reluctant to accept the truth. His blindness was spiritual, like so many people today. Satan is a clever enemy of God and his people. Does not James say, ‘Even the demons believe there is one God- and tremble’ (James 2:19). But Satan’s ‘clever’ plans are always for destruction, and he cannot stop himself.

The Jewish leaders became jealous of Jesus and plotted to get rid of him. They could do nothing until the time, God’s time, had come for Jesus to die, and even then their evil plan backfired when Jesus rose from the dead!

Saul’s uncalled-for jealous anger will lead to his own destruction, not David’s; indeed, he ended up committing suicide (31:4). Did the Lord harden his heart, as he did that of Pharaoh? Saul’s hatred towards David stands in stark contrast to every other person in Israel. His own son was not jealous of David; he loved David like a brother. And then his own daughter loved David as her husband. But Saul blindly persisted in his effort to destroy David, while recognising that the Lord was with David. Gamaliel gave the Jews advice about attacking the apostles of Jesus: ‘Lest you be found to be fighting against God’ (Acts 5:39). I pray there is no one here who is fighting against God!

**Jealous anger consumes Saul**  Text: 1Samuel 19

Following a period of mourning the death of Queen Elizabeth II, our news has returned to the usual subjects, namely war or threats of war, and abusive behaviour; perhaps we should continue in a state of mourning! I just read that one in seven families is a single parent family. Elizabeth visits an old man living on his own in our neighbourhood with a meal. He has two children but has little to do with either. Family friction, and indeed separation, is not uncommon. This may not be the fault of any one person, but in the case of the royal family of Israel it was. King Saul forced his family into taking sides, into choosing between loyalty to their father and love for David.

In the previous chapter we read of Jonathan making a covenant with David, ‘because he loved him as his own soul’ (18:3), and Michal marrying David because she loved him (18:20). The royal household could have been a place of love and harmony, and it was for a time. But when Saul’s jealousy was aroused by the words of the women’s song, his life was overtaken by a consuming anger and a passionate desire to kill David. This consuming passion led to an attempt to murder David with his spear (18:11), and to covertly have the Philistines kill him. But the Lord was with David, protecting him and giving him success on the battle field. Saul failed to understand this truth, a truth told to him by Samuel the prophet (15:29). Saul’s jealous anger prevented him from listening to the word of the Lord, and even to human reason.

Our subheadings are: ‘Son’s advice for his father’, ‘Second spear attack’, ‘Saul’s daughter helps David escape’ and, ‘Spirit of the Lord stops Saul in his tracks’.

**1. Son’s advice for his father**

Saul’s secret or covert attempts to get rid of David become an open secret as we enter chapter 19. Saul called his son, Jonathan, and all his servants to tell them they should kill David. This order must have shocked everyone because David was a loyal servant who was loved by everyone. Jonathan found it hard to believe- his own father openly declaring death to his best friend. Jonathan rushed out of the meeting to warn David of his father’s order for David to be killed. Kings in those days ruled with absolute power, power to kill anyone who crossed them. We see the remnants of such power in the likes of Putin and other dictators. Saul had forgotten that he ruled because of God’s anointing, and that absolute power belongs to God alone. Perhaps Putin should remember this also!

Jonathan told David, who was now residing in the palace, to go and hide until morning. He realised, and David now realised, that his life was in danger. Jonathan told David he would speak to his father about his order to kill David (19:3). Just why he would speak to him in the field near to where David was hiding is not clear; it would mean David could see them talking, but did he overhear also? In any case, Jonathan immediately reported back to David.

Jonathan spoke to well of David, reminding his father of how able and loyal David was as a servant of the king. David had not sinned against Saul, so why would Saul sin against him? He warned his father not to ‘sin against innocent blood’ (19:5). Jonathan was concerned to honour his father and mother, but this did not prevent him from giving advice to his father. The situation of Jonathan having to choose between obeying his father and obeying God had not yet arrived, and he was doing his best to avoid such a situation.

Jonathan must have been pleased that his father listened to his advice, his plea on behalf of David. Saul went so far as to swear to a reversal of his command: ‘As the Lord lives, he shall not be killed’ (19:6). Jonathan the peacemaker had convinced the king to make peace with David and stop trying to kill him. Sadly, Saul’s solemn vow was not worth much, as we will soon see. Satan of course, is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). It is impossible to make a treaty with a man who has no respect for the truth. Saul’s vow towards David stands in contrast to Jonathan’s vow towards David. This chapter is one of contrasts, contrasts that highlight the slow but sure downfall of King Saul, the man who disobeyed the word of the Lord and refused to repent.

We are jumping ahead! For the moment we see that Jonathan convinced his father to withdraw his death sentence upon David, so David could return to the palace, to his family, and to his duties. Jonathan told David of his father’s vow not to harm David, and brought him back to Saul (19:7).

**2. Second spear attack**

‘And there was war again’ with the Philistines (19:8). Some time passed, with David serving in the courts of the king. He was of course, married to the king’s daughter. Yet war with the Philistines was never far away, and David was again called to lead Israel’s army in repelling the invaders. The Lord was with David and he defeated them decisively (19:8). The Philistines fled and David returned home victorious. Seeing people singing the praises of David as he returned in victory probably sparked jealous feelings in Saul’s troubled heart.

But it was ‘the distressing spirit from the Lord’ coming upon Saul that sparked his next attack on David (19:9). His vow not to kill David was forgotten as Saul sat in his house with David playing music to soothe his troubled soul. Saul picked up his spear and threw it at David hoping to pin him to the wall (19:10). David managed to avoid Saul’s spear, yet again (cf. 18:11). If the spear was driven into the wall, imagine what it would have done had it struck David! David realised that Saul’s vow meant nothing and that his life was again in danger while ever he was in the palace. Actually, it was Michal his wife who not only warned him to flee, but assisted him in doing so.

**3. Saul’s daughter helps David escape**

After escaping Saul’s spear, David went home to his wife. It appears that their house was built into the outer wall of the palace. Saul’s decree of death to David was reactivated, with messengers being sent to wait outside David’s house and kill him when he emerged in the morning. Psalm 59 is a record of David’s prayer at this time. Realising the danger David was facing, Michal told him he had to flee that very night. She ‘let David down through a window, and he escaped’ (19:12).

When David failed to come out the next morning, Saul got suspicious. He sent men to go in and arrest David. Michal stalled for time by telling them that David was sick. Saul became furious and sent men to bring David, in his bed if necessary, so he could kill him (19:15). But Michal had cleverly set up a ‘dummy’ in David’s bed- actually an image or household idol (Heb. *teraphim*). If you lived in Europe today you would have no trouble finding a life-sized statue to put in a bed. Michal dressed this image with goats hair and clothes (19:13).

When Michal’s deception was discovered by Saul’s messengers, Saul expressed deep disappointment in his daughter: ‘Why have you deceived me like this?’ (19:17). In those days, and in some societies today, children were expected to be loyal to their parents before their spouse. This is not biblical of course (Gen 2:24), and is the cause many a divorce. Michal’s first loyalty was to her husband, so she helped David escape her father’s wicked and murderous hands. If you wonder at Michal’s less-than-truthful answer to Saul remember, her life was also in danger (19:17).

**4. Spirit of God stops Saul in his tracks**

And so David, the king’s son-in-law, the king’s therapist, and the destroyer of the Philistines, was forced to run for his life from a king intent on killing him. David must have felt very isolated and alone as he fled his home and family. But the Lord was with him; David was still the Lord’s anointed. David made his way to Ramah and to Samuel, who had anointed him. Did he have some questions for Samuel about his anointing? David confided in Samuel all that Saul had done to him (19:18).

Together David and Samuel went to Naioth, which may have been a prophet’s camp near Ramah. But hiding inside the territory of Israel was very difficult when Saul had his spy’s everywhere. Someone told Saul that David was in Naioth in Ramah; this someone would have been richly rewarded for this information no doubt. So Saul sent messengers or soldiers to go and grab David and bring him to Saul.

Where could David hide now? Maybe the words of his own psalm came to him: ‘Lord, you are my hiding place’ (Ps 32:7). His own wit, and his wife’s scheming, had protected him thus far, but who would protect David now? Saul was a prophet, not a warrior. The Lord himself will intervene to save David, just as he later did to save us through David’s Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.

When Saul’s men arrived they saw Samuel and his fellow prophets prophesying. The Spirit of God came upon them and they started prophesying also (19: 20). The Spirit of God came upon them with such power that they were rendered powerless! Word got back to Saul about these men, so he sent another party. The same thing happened to them when they came to arrest David; they were ‘forced’ to prophesy like the first party. Saul sent a third party, and the same thing happened to them (19:21). Saul was having a bad day! In fact, he had not had a good day for some time! We might think he would come to his senses and stop fighting against God. Jonathan tried to advise him, just as Samuel had done earlier. But by now he was listening to no one, except Satan.

Saul’s son, his daughter, and now his soldiers, were failing him in his effort to kill David, so Saul would have to do it himself. Saul set out for Ramah and came to the great well at Sechu (19:22). He asked, and was told, that Samuel and David were in the place Naioth in Ramah. The Lord is no respecter of robes or titles, so the Spirit of God came upon Saul also and he started prophesying until he came to Naioth in Ramah. ‘Prophesying’ here refers to ecstatic utterances and uninhibited dancing. Our thoughts take us back to Saul prophesying as a sign confirming his anointing as king, and that in the same place! At that time the people said, ‘Is Saul also among the prophets?’, and they say the same thing here (11:11, 19:24). Saul would experience the same power of God, but this time it was to prevent him from harming the Lord’s newly anointed king and ruler of the people of God.

King Saul experienced humiliation rather than exhilaration or confirmation from the Spirit of God. As he prophesied before Samuel, Saul stripped off his clothes or robes, and lay naked all that day and night (19:24). He would not remove his royal robes but the Spirit of God made him do this. He put aside his royal garments, something Jonathan had already done out of love for David and a sense of David’s anointing. Years later another king, this time a foreign king, would learn as Saul should have learnt, that God is almighty and that no man, king or otherwise, can frustrate his plans. Remember Nebuchadnezzar being driven by God to eat grass like cows, get wet with dew, grow hair like eagle’s feathers, and finger nails like bird claws (Dan 4:33).

No man or woman, not even a king or queen, is outside the realm of God’s plans and God’s judgment. Let this be a warning to you who choose to fight against God, and a comfort to you who are suffering at the hands of ungodly men or women, whoever they may be.

**Secure in a covenant of the Lord**  Text: 1Samuel 20

We have a new king, King Charles III. He was in line to the throne for a long time. There was a suggestion he might let his son, Prince William take the throne. There was never a suggestion he might give the throne to some commoner. Jonathan, the son of King Saul, was in line for the throne of Israel but he was ready to give it to David, son of Jesse. Such an attitude was unheard of then, and even today. His father would not accept Jonathan’s friendship with David who, in his mind, posed a real and present threat to his throne. While ever David lived, Saul told his son, ‘you shall not be established, nor your kingdom’ (20:31). But Jonathan had made a covenant with David, and had given him his royal robe and armour (18:4). Jonathan was ready to divest himself or empty himself of royal glory in order for his beloved friend David to be exalted, according to the will of God.

Saul continues in his jealous anger and his plot to destroy David. At the end of this chapter, David will flee the palace to become a fugitive, hunted by the king. But while the relationship between Saul and David deteriorates, the relationship between Jonathan and David becomes even stronger; it is this second relationship that is the focus of this chapter.

In the previous chapter we saw Jonathan speak well of David to his father, and his father withdraw his command for David to be killed; he vowed not to kill David (19:6). But Saul’s oath or vow meant nothing. David escaped another spear-attack, and then his wife, Saul’s daughter, helped him escape. David ran to Samuel but Saul tracked him down, only to be stopped in his tracks by the Spirit of God coming upon him.

Here in this chapter we see David meeting Jonathan. How come! Surely he would run to his own family, not to the king’s son to be safe from the king! In our first subheading we will try to answer this question. This subheading is, ‘David pleads covenant kindness’, the following, ‘Jonathan promises and pleads covenant kindness’, then ‘Jonathan keeps his promises’ and finally, ‘Covenant provides peace despite difficulties’.

**1. David pleads covenant kindness**

Why did David go to Jonathan when Saul was out to kill him? Blood relatives are usually our best help in times of difficulty, even if they have been critical and unhelpful in the past (17:28). Jonathan and David had become brothers in the faith and in a covenant made before the Lord. Jonathan loved David as his own soul, and David Jonathan (18:3, 20:17). David came back to Jonathan because he wanted to know why Saul, was trying to kill him. ‘What is my sin?’ he asked his friend Jonathan (20:1). Jonathan protested that his father was not trying to kill David: ‘No way!’ (20:2). He assured David that he would know because his father would not hide such a matter from him. But David was not so sure. Their friendship was being tested! Saul knew of Jonathan and David’s friendship, so might not be as open with Jonathan as he supposed; Saul did not want to cause his son grief (20:3). David told Jonathan on oath that his life was in danger.

Jonathan graciously accepted David’s reasoning and took his fear seriously. He agreed to do whatever David wanted. David had a plan by which both of them would come to know Saul’s intentions. This meeting between Jonathan and David would have been in secret because Saul was on the lookout for David to kill him. The next day the king would be hosting the monthly New Moon feast in the palace. Important men like the king’s son-in-law and military leader would be expected to attend. But David asked Jonathan to make an excuse for his absence. David would hide in a field ‘until the third day evening’, and Jonathan would communicate the king’s response to David’s absence (20:5-7). Again, Jonathan was sure everything was okay, but David was not so sure.

David appealed to Jonathan on the basis of their covenant made before the Lord (20:8). He appealed to him on the basis of ‘covenant love’ (Hebrew *chesed* -translated ‘kindness’). Under the terms of this same covenant, David asked Jonathan to kill him himself, ‘if there is iniquity in me’ (20:8). Making or cutting a covenant was so serious that the parties vowed upon their own life (20:13). David was ready to be judged justly but not murdered unjustly. Jonathan accepted David’s appeal and promised to tell him the truth about his father’s intentions. David asked how Jonathan will communicate with him, and Jonathan takes David to the field to show him (20:11).

**2. Jonathan promises and pleads covenant kindness**

We could pick up the story at verse 18 where we find Jonathan explaining how he will inform David of his father’s feelings towards David. But Jonathan had something else to tell David as they met together in the field. He wanted the covenant between them to extend to his family, to his children (20:15). Jonathan begins by calling the Lord God of Israel as his witness, and ends by calling down God’s curse upon him if he does not sound out his father and send news to David by the third day. If it was bad news then Jonathan would send David away safely, but with great sadness. He would send him away saying, ‘The Lord be with you as he was with my father’ (20:13). The Lord was no longer with his father Saul because the Lord had taken His Spirit from him and given His Spirit to David (16:13,14). This was Jonathan’s promise or vow to David. He will detail how he will communicate this news shortly.

But as mentioned, Jonathan now asks for covenant kindness or covenant love from David in return. Jonathan knew that David would become king. Maybe David had shared with him about his anointing by Samuel, there being no place for secrets in a covenant relationship. Knowing the practice by which kings eliminated or killed all who were a threat to their throne, Jonathan feared for his life and the life of his children in any purge David might carry out when he became king; note the purge carried out by Baasha when he became king (1Kings 15:29, 16:11). Jonathan of course, posed no threat because in covenant love he had given his inheritance to David. But what of any sons of Jonathan?

Jonathan made a covenant with ‘the house of David’, and ‘caused David to vow’ before the Lord, that he would not ‘cut off’ or kill Jonathan’s family (20:15-17). Again we are reminded that Jonathan ‘loved David as he loved his own soul’. Why? Who was David? He was only a shepherd boy. But Jonathan vowed to give up his own kingdom and his own earthly inheritance for this ‘nobody’ called David. Is this not what we call grace, unmerited favour and love? Jonathan was willing to be cut off from his own family and even willing to die for this ‘nobody’, this ‘son of Jesse’ whom his father despised. Is there anyone you know who compares to Jonathan? You will know people who compare to Saul no doubt, people driven by jealous anger, but Jonathan?

Jonathan goes on to explain to David his communication plan. He agreed that David absent himself from the New Moon feast, and hide in the field near the stone Ezal until the third day (20:5,19). Jonathan now tells David how he will get news to him about his father. Both were marked men, David because Saul wanted to kill him, and Jonathan because Saul knew he was in collaboration with David. The plan was ingenious. Jonathan like archery, and was a good archer it seems. He would casually go to the field where David was hiding to shoot three arrows. He would take a boy with him to fetch the arrows. This boy would serve as a decoy for anyone spying on him; anyone seeing Jonathan wander off alone might have raised the alarm. The messaging would be simple. If the arrow went long and Jonathan shouted to the boy, ‘Look beyond you’, then David would know to flee, but if the arrow landed short and Jonathan shouted, ‘Look the arrows are on this side of you’, then David would know it was safe to return. Their meeting in the field ended with Jonathan declaring the Lord to be witness between them forever (20:23). Neither knew if they would see each other again.

**3. Jonathan keeps his promise**

One preacher called this section, ‘Friends are loyal’, after designating the first half of the chapter, ‘Friendship tested’. Jonathan proves to be a loyal friend to David, even at the cost of his own future and relationship with his father. Again we think of One whose covenant love towards us came at the cost of His relationship with His Father.

With David hiding in the field, King Saul took his seat at the New Moon feast. Jonathan sat across from him, while Abner sat by the side of the king; but David’s place was empty (20:25). Saul showed no concern the first day, assuming David was ceremonially unclean for some reason. But on the second day he asked Jonathan why the ‘son of Jesse’ had not showed up (20:27). Jonathan gave the excuse David told him to give and ‘confessed’ he had given David permission to go. Saul flew into a rage, denouncing his son in unspeakable terms. He warned Jonathan that while ever the ‘son of Jesse’ was alive his inheritance was threatened. He demanded Jonathan bring David at once so he could be killed (20:31).

Jonathan was a man who always looked for good in people, but it was hard to find any good in his father at this time. He demanded of his father, as David had demanded of him, to know what David had done to deserve death (20:1, 32). Saul had no answer, no reasonable answer anyway. He answered Jonathan by throwing his spear at him (20:33). Jonathan was understandably shocked and angry, and left the table. He had an answer to send to David, and answer that upset him terribly. He felt shame towards his father and grief towards David. We have been drawing some parallels between Jonathan and Jesus but we do not move into any comprehensive allegory.

‘And so it was in the morning’, of the third day it seems, that Jonathan went out to the field to fulfil his promise to David (20:35). He shot an arrow and the boy ran to get it, at which time Jonathan shouted, ‘Is not the arrow beyond you?’ adding a warning for David to hurry and not delay (20:37,38). The boy returned the arrows, unaware of Jonathan’s messaging to David. Jonathan sent the boy home, so he could meet with David privately to say goodbye. The danger of being spied on had diminished it seems.

David emerged from his hiding place to bow before Jonathan three times. Then they kissed and wept together, ‘but David more so’ (20:41); this was the greeting of close friends, or any friends, in that culture. David’s fear for his life was not unfounded. He would become a fugitive, a hunted man in his own home and land. He would wander the earth with no place to call home, and no place to lay his head. But he would find comfort in the words of his brother in the Lord: ‘Go in peace’ and, ‘May the Lord be between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever’ (20:42).

As this brother in the Lord went back to the city, David went off alone to a place only the Lord knew- the Lord’s presence was all that David had. He would see Jonathan only one more time before he was killed in battle. He mourned for Jonathan: ‘You have been very pleasant to me; your love to me was wonderful, surpassing the love of women’ (2Sam 1:26). David was faithful to his covenant with Jonathan; when he became king he brought Jonathan’s son, Mephibosheth, to eat at his own table (2Sam 9:13).

In closing, recall the title of today’s sermon; ‘Secure in a covenant of the Lord’. David found security in the covenant Jonathan made with him. Jonathan loved David so much that he was willing to give up his own position in the royal family. He gave it up to save David, in the hope that he would one day become king.

Do you know someone who gave up the glory he had in heaven, someone who emptied himself to come and save you from death? Yes, this is what we read of Jesus in Philippians 2:7. He left his throne in heaven and all its glory to come into our poverty-stricken world. He loved us so much that he went to the cross for you and me. He suffered the shame of the cross and the rejection of his Father as he bore our sin. But before he died and rose again he made a covenant with us in his own blood. In this covenant you have peace and security that extends beyond this life into eternity. ‘My peace I give to you’ said Jesus, and even as you have tribulation in this world, ‘Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33).

**David on the run** Text: 1Samuel 21:1-22:5

William Carey was called by the Lord to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to the heathen of India, but the leaders of his church did not agree. He set out for India with a pregnant wife and three children. The British East India Company and others opposed him settling in Calcutta so he settled in the Danish colony nearby. Within a year of his landing in 1793, his young son died of dysentery. His wife suffered mental illness for twelve years before she also died.

A call to serve the Lord does not often come with easy passage. Carey endured the early years, but many have not. David’s anointing as king of Israel was not followed by easy passage. His victory over Goliath in the name of the Lord was not exactly a step towards the throne. In fact, it proved to be a barrier because of the jealous anger of King Saul. David would spend the next few years running from Saul. With Jonathan’s help, he was assured of Saul’s determination to kill him. He fled to the priest in the tabernacle at Nob, and then to a Philistine city. His next place of refuge was a cave, before going to another foreign country to find refuge for his parents. He was advised by a prophet to return to Judah. Let us follow David and learn from his experiences of the Lord’s provision and protection.

**1. Goliath’s sword and holy bread**

David was hiding in a field near the palace when Jonathan told him to flee immediately because Saul was determined to kill him. He dared not go home because Saul’s had spies all over the place. So David had to run for his life with only the clothes on his back. But run where? He had already been to Samuel. The tabernacle at Nob was nearby, just a few kilometres north of Jerusalem. David hoped the priest, as a man of God, would not be acting as a spy for Saul, and might actually help him. There is no indication at this stage that David was seeking the priest’s advice as to what he should do. All he asks for is some bread for his journey; as it turns out, he was heading for a neighbouring country; Gath was around 40km away.

Ahimelech was surprised, and afraid, when David showed up alone. He knew David of course- everyone did- but they usually saw him at the head of his military unit, going to war or returning from war against the Philistines. Why was David alone and out of uniform? David had a made-up story to satisfy Ahimelech’s fears. He probably thought that the less Ahimelech knew about David problems the safer it would be for him. David told him that the king had sent him on some urgent, covert assignment, and that he had sent his young men to another place.

If David’s story was true, how come he was asking for bread? Would not the king have given him supplies? David first asked Ahimelech for five loaves of bread (21:3). The priest assured David that he had no ordinary bread; the only bread in the place was the holy bread set on the golden table of showbread inside the tent of meeting. This holy bread was for the priests. It was not for the common man, and certainly not for men who were ritually unclean. David assured him that he was ritually clean, as were the young men of his story. So the priest gave David the showbread that had been on the table before the Lord (21:6). It had been replaced by fresh bread that day.

We learn a couple of lessons from this incident. Firstly, that the Lord is powerful to provide our daily bread. Few of us, if any, have ever gone to bed hungry. We pray, ‘Give us this day our daily bread’ but we usually have much more that a day’s supply in our fridge. David had no food, and no money to buy food, as he fled his home. He was relying upon God, or the man of God, to give this basic necessity of life. It is a matter of shame that so many of God’s people take for granted his daily provision, as they eat without pausing to give thanks to the Lord.

Secondly, Jesus himself draws a lesson from this incident, a lesson for legalists in the church (Mat 12:1-8). When his disciples picked grain to eat on the Sabbath, the legalistic Pharisees jumped on them for breaking the fourth commandment, or their version of this commandment. Jesus argued from this Scripture that God did not give laws to increase our suffering but gave laws for our good and for his glory. David needed daily bread and the Lord supplied his need. This is why our Confession states that, ‘duties of necessity and mercy’ are permitted on the Lord’s Day.

David had a second need that he shared with the priest of Nob, need for a sword or spear for personal protection. It was a long time since he carried a sling and stones! He was now a regular soldier, but leaving home in great haste he failed to pack his sword- which was basically true. The house of God was not a storehouse for weapons, but there was a sword ‘wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod’, the word of Goliath the Philistine (21:9). How ironic! Did David know this sword was there? Not necessarily. But since it was the only weapon in the tabernacle, and Ahimelech offered it to him, David was grateful to have the sword of the Philistine over whom God gave him victory all those years before. The Lord provided David with bread and with protection, even as he fled for his life. He had no one to depend upon except the Lord, and the Lord was supplying his needs.

What about Doeg the Edomite you will be asking? While the Lord, through Ahimelech the priest, was supplying David with food and a weapon, they were being spied on this man Doeg, Saul’s head herdsman (21:7). The mention of this name fills us with dread, and all the more if you have read ahead. Doeg the Edomite almost rhymes with Judas Iscariot! Doeg and Judas are not very popular names are they? We have not heard of this man before, but we do know about the Edomites, the descendants of Esau, who refused to let Moses and the people of God pass through their land (Numb 20:21). Doeg was a foreigner, serving King Saul as a mercenary. David later admits to seeing Doeg at the tabernacle and having his own fears (22:22).

**2. Goliath’s town of Gath**

‘Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all’ (Ps 34:19). This is what David wrote of his experience in the Philistine city of Gath, Goliath’s home city. David fled into enemy territory to escape the efforts of his own king to kill him. David must have been desperate. What a choice- death at the hands of King Saul, or death at the hands of the Philistines! Carrying Goliath’s sword, David fled to the nearest Philistine city, Gath, the hometown of Goliath, and no doubt other Philistines he had killed in battle. Unlike his previous encounters with this enemy, he was now alone.

If David thought he could enter Gath incognito, he was mistaken. The servants of the king of Gath recognised David and told the king, ‘Is this not David, the king of the land?’ (21:11). They probably recognised David from the time he stepped out to fight, and kill, their champion. They had also heard about the victory song sung by the women of Israel after David killed Goliath. Did they conclude, like Saul, that this song was tantamount to proclaiming David, king of Israel? If David delighted to hear this song the first time, he must have hated these words by now! For better or for worse, his reputation went before him.

David had gone to the king of Gath for protection. He was in custody of some sort, but at least he was alive. However, when he was identified, he ‘was very much afraid of Achish, the king of Gath’ (22:12). David had a lot of Philistine blood on his hands. Although Psalm 56 is a prayer associated with his time in Gath, there is no mention of prayer in this account in 1Samuel. Yet David had the wit and wisdom to pretend to be mad in order to escape death in Gath. He scratched or scribbled on the gate, and let his saliva dribble down his beard (21:13). Mental illness has become a common plea in the courts of our land today, but I am yet to see anyone go as far as David in claiming to be mentally ill! David’s performance proved convincing. The king reckoned he had enough madmen to deal with already and told his servants to remove David from his house (21:15).

**3. Gathers family and discontents**

David fled back into Israel to hide in the cave of Adullam on the western escarpment (22:1). He was still alone, but not for much longer. Psalm 142 may well have been written when he first came to this cave. In this ‘contemplation of David’ we hear him crying to the Lord in loneliness and fear: ‘You are my refuge’ because ‘no one cares for my soul’. The Lord heard his cry, and soon David had companions, including his own family. Hearing that David was in this cave, they went down from Bethlehem to see him. They were probably fleeing Saul and his murderous madness. Anyone related to David was in danger, and the whole tribe of Judah was treated with suspicion (22:7).

Also attracted to David were the marginalised people of the land, people who had fallen through the cracks as it were (22:2). King Saul was focussed on himself, not on the people of his kingdom, apart from a select few. He was the king Samuel warned about (8:11-18). Some four hundred debtors and discontents gathered around David while he was hiding in the cave of Adullam. David was no longer alone, but his companions were not exactly choice men. He would need great skill in people management to mould these men into a militia, but at least he now had more protection than just Goliath's sword.

David’s first concern was to keep his mum and dad safe. He was the youngest son but was apparently leader of his family at this time. David had made a covenant with Jonathan but he was born into a covenant with his own family. Being on the run from Saul was no excuse for David not to honour his father and mother according to the fifth commandment. So David took his parents to Moab, to the king of Moab no less. The land of Moab bordered Israel to the south east, on the opposite side of the Dead Sea.

None of Israel’s neighbours were friendly in those days- or even today! Saul had fought against Moab (14:47). David was on the run from Saul but would still have been viewed with suspicion. In the providence of God however, David had a special connection with Moab; his great grandmother was a Moabitess. Is the book of Ruth in the Bible for this purpose, to inform us of David’s ancestors and of Ruth the Moabitess in particular? The king of Moab agreed to let David’s parents stay in Moab until, as David says, ‘I know what God will do for me’ (22:3).

Although David appears to be living by his wits, we have heard his prayers in the psalms, and now, in the presence of the king of Moab, he confesses that he is waiting for the Lord to guide him. Waiting upon the Lord was how David lived his life (Ps 27:14). What about you? Have you learned to wait upon the Lord like David?

**4. Gad to guide him**

A prophet called Gad suddenly appears on the scene to guide David. Prophets were men who spoke the word of the Lord. Samuel had anointed David king. Maybe Gad was from Samuel’s group of prophets, but we don’t know. What we do know is that he spoke to David while he was hiding from Saul ‘in the stronghold’ (22:4, 5). Gad told David to return to the land of Judah, so he went to the forest of Hereth- somewhere in Judah (22:5).

David was ready to listen to the prophet, having just said he was waiting to know the will of God (22:3). It would have taken courage to return to Saul’s territory, but he now had specific guidance from the Lord. Being back in the land was dangerous, but would be beneficial in the long run in the fulfilment of God’s will for him to become king.

Our Lord Jesus Christ knew the dangers of going up to Jerusalem that last time, but went knowing that it was God’s will for him. Are you seeking God’s will for your life or are you intent on avoiding any risk or hardship? Are you looking to live a life of luxury just like the people around you, people whose only focus and only hope is in the treasures and pleasures of this world?

**Saul in Satan’s hands**  Text: 1Samuel 22:6-22

If the people of Israel were not crying out to the Lord about the conduct of their king at the beginning of this chapter, they would have been doing so at the end, after he massacred all their priests. Samuel warned them when they asked for a king just how a human king would behave, taking their sons, their servants and their supplies. But this would be the least of their concerns. They would end up crying to the Lord because of much worse behaviour (cf. 8:18).

We have seen Saul’s paranoia already. He feared David because the Lord was with David and no longer with him, and because his own son became David’s best friend. We have seen him attempt to kill his own son because of a rash oath, and attempt to kill David, but we have not yet seen the brutality recorded in this chapter.

The apostle John writes of the Antichrist (with a capital ‘A’) coming, and, ‘even now many antichrists (with a small ‘a’) have come’ (1John 2:18). All who are outside the covenant of God are children of Satan, but some individuals are more evil than others; some ‘prefigure the full embodiment of evil to come’ writes Davis. Antichrist openly opposes what is good, opposes God, and opposes God’s people (Ps 52:3). Pharaoh tried to destroy God’s people by killing all their baby boys. Herod tried to destroy God’s own son by killing all the baby boys in Bethlehem. Haman tried to destroy all God’s people. And then there was Hitler. Saul and this evil Edomite tried to kill all God’s priests, and succeeded except for one. And all because of his jealous anger towards David. Our Confession refers to the man who supervised the torture and murder of hundreds of faithful believers in the inquisition (1478 - 1834) as the antichrist.

While the events of this chapter are horrific, and remind us of the depravity of sin and the power of evil, they also assure us that God is sovereign in all things.

**1. A paranoid and lonely king**

When David fled his home and his homeland he was all alone. He went to the priest at Nob, who gave him bread and a sword. He fled to Gath and then to Moab. David was now back in the land with about four hundred men around him. In verse 6 the scene shifts from David to Saul, seated under a tamarisk tree in his home place of Gibeah. His servants, or bodyguard of Benjamites, were standing around him, but still he had his spear in his hand. Did he not trust these men? He was afraid of David because the Lord was with him. This fear seems to have extended to other men, even his own son. Saul had become paranoid, fearing everyone was against him and that anyone might kill. Leaders who become more and more evil make more and more enemies, so have reason to fear for their lives.

Saul got news that David was still around, and that he had lots of men with him (22:6). His initial group of four hundred was probably growing by the day, as Saul in his madness made more and more enemies and became more and more isolated.

While I was away, elections were held in Kenya. Everyone is thankful that these passed peacefully, because in previous elections inter-tribal rivalry spilled over into violence. A friend of mine is Kikuyu but lives in a region dominated by another tribe. He showed me house after house of fellow Kikuyus that had been torched during elections.

King Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin which was much smaller than the tribe of Judah, David’s tribe. In his paranoia and failure of leadership, Saul was gathering men from his own tribe around him. We hear him ranting at them about giving them fields and vineyards and positions of power in his regime, while warning them that the son of Jesse was not likely to reward them like this (22:7); Saul always referred to David in a disparaging way.

At the same time as promising his fellow Benjamites rewards, he castigates them for conspiring against him- we used the word ‘ranting’ deliberately. He accused the men closest to him of failing to tell him about Jonathan’s friendship with David, and of other plotting by his son. Saul accused them of not feeling sorry for him; he had plenty of sorrow for himself! In his delusional state he even thought David was lying in wait to harm him (22:8, 13).

**2. Appearance of Doeg the Edomite**

The men of Benjamin standing around Saul listened in silence to his ranting, raving, and accusations of conspiracy. But one man, a foreigner, saw the opportunity to ingratiate himself to this crazy king. Doeg the Edomite stepped forward to tell Saul he had seen ‘the son of Jesse’ going to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest (22:9). We shudder as we hear this name, ‘Doeg the Edomite’. ‘Doeg the dobber’ is about to act as an agent of Satan.

Doeg had seen David talking to Ahimelech at the tabernacle, and seen Ahimelech give David bread and Goliath’s sword; but did he hear what they said? If so, he does not tell Saul. In fact, he assumes the priest was inquiring of the Lord for David, but the account in chapter 21 tells us how David was deceiving the priest into thinking he was on the king’s business. To inquire of the Lord about where to go would have blown his deception. Yet this assumption, or deliberate lie, was the first thing Doeg tells Saul because it implicates Ahimelech in Saul’s conspiracy theory. Ahimelech, as we know, was deceived by David into giving him bread and a sword.

**3. Ahimelech defends David and himself**

On the basis of Doeg’s report, Saul sent for Ahimelech and all the priests from Nob, and they came (22:11). He contemptuously refers to Ahimelech as ‘the son of Ahitub’; whenever I hear anyone call me ‘Muldoon’ I get worried! Saul speaks down to the priest of God, who humbly addresses King Saul as ‘my lord’. The crazed king was now acting as judge, a crazy or irrational judge. He accused the priest of conspiring against him, just as he had accused his bodyguards. But now he had evidence provided by a true traitor, Doeg. He continues to display paranoia in saying that David was lying in wait to harm him (22:13).

Ahimelech did not deny giving David bread and a sword, although inquiring of the Lord for him was another matter. But in answering the charges of the king, Ahimelech firstly speaks a good word for David. Saul thought David was against him, wanting to take his throne, but he had no evidence of such a plan. He thought everyone was conspiring with David, another sign of paranoia. Ahimelech assured Saul that David was not against him, and not everyone was conspiring with David. The priest in effect, spoke on behalf of the people in pointing out that David was Saul’s son-in-law, that David was a loyal leader in his army, going wherever the king sent him (22:14). Singing the praises of David would not endear Ahimelech to Saul, but it gives a brief glimpse of the truth, which did not accord with Saul’s imagination and irrational fears.

Ahimelech goes on to defend himself. He did not deny giving David bread and Goliath’s sword, but he did question the accusation that he was inquiring of God for David (22:15). Some versions of the Bible have Ahimelech saying that he did inquire for David, just as he had always done. But the NKJV points to Ahimelech denying that he inquired of the Lord for David. As we have mentioned, David was busy deceiving Ahimelech, not sharing his real situation and looking for guidance from God. Besides, Ahimelech rejected what was being imputed in the first accusation made by Doeg. He assures Saul that he knew nothing of David’s plotting against Saul, or even of him running away from Saul at the time; and his fellow priest’s new nothing either (22:15).

Ahimelech said he was not guilty of conspiracy, and under the law at least two witnesses had to testify against him before he could be convicted (Deut 19:15). But tragically, Ahimelech was judged by a man who was no longer concerned for the truth or for justice, a man clinging to power by every human or demonic means. We see the world, the flesh, and the devil all aligned against David, and against this man of God who innocently helped him.

**4. Annihilation of God’s priests**

King Saul ordered his bodyguard to kill Ahimelech immediately. The single-witness and single-judge trial was over; not only was the judge paranoid, but he had a clear conflict of interest in this case. Not only Ahimelech, but all his family, were sentenced to death. Saul assumed without any evidence that they also knew David was fleeing and did not tell him (22:17).

But Saul’s fellow men of Benjamin did not move. They refused to strike the priests of the Lord. They defied their king, probably because they feared God more than the king. To strike the priests of the Lord was sacrilege, in effect an attack upon the Lord himself. We breathe a sigh of relief when some men choose to obey God’s command rather than man’s. Saul was getting desperate. Even those closest to him stood opposed to his wickedness. Saul was making himself an enemy of God’s priests and of God himself. Like antichrist, he was trying to destroy them.

Saul’s jealous anger towards David was destroying him. He was paranoid, and now about to commit a most heinous act. Saul was becoming more and more isolated, such that now there was only one man ready to obey him, an agent of Satan called Doeg; even his name reminds us of a dog ready to kill at its master’s command- or for the treat it might get!

The king turned to Doeg, ‘You turn and kill the priests!’ he bellowed (22:18). Doeg obliged, and that day killed eighty-five men who wore the linen ephod’ (22:18). Eighty-five innocent servants of the Lord murdered in cold blood at the direction of Saul, king of Israel. Those who refused to obey his command must have looked on in horror. News must have spread, and people must have rememberd the words of Samuel the prophet: ‘And you will cry out in that day because of your king’ (8:18).

The shedding of innocent blood did not stop with the eighty-five priests. Doeg moved on to Nob to murder more men, women and children and babies (22:19). He even slaughtered their oxen, donkeys and sheep. This was total destruction. Why? Remember when Saul was commanded to punish the Amalekites for their wickedness: ‘Go and utterly destroy the sinner, the Amalekites’ (15:18). Saul disobeyed the Lord and the Lord tore the kingdom of Israel from him that day (15:28). How ironic that Saul ends up utterly destroying a town of God’s covenant people, every last human being, and even the animals. Is this not a picture of antichrist? John says of antichrists that, ‘they went out from us’ (1John 2:19). The Lord had long since taken his Spirit from Saul, and given his Spirit to David. Saul was now listening to the lies of Satan and doing the works of his father, ‘a murderer from the beginning’ (John 8:44).

In all this wickedness we must not forget that God was fulfilling his sovereign purposes. The apostle Peter spoke of the wicked men who put Jesus on the cross saying, ‘Him being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken with lawless hands, have crucified and put to death’ (Acts 2:23). Even as Doeg killed the priests of Nob, the Lord was fulfilling his judgment upon the house of Eli: ‘Behold, the days are coming… that there will not be an old man in your house’ (2:31). Eli’s sons were put to death for their wickedness. Even Eli was guilty of honouring his sons more than the Lord. God’s judgment may be delayed but it cannot be avoided, except by repentance, which is only possible in this life.

**5. Abiathar escapes**

With all the priests massacred, how would worship continue? God’s plans for the priesthood in Israel were not thwarted by the wickedness of Saul and Doeg, any more than his plans to save you were thwarted by the wickedness of the Jewish leaders and the Romans when they crucified His Son and our Saviour. God would preserve a remnant in the person of a priest called Abiathar. This son of Ahimelech escaped Nob and fled to David.

David was deeply saddened when he heard of the massacre of the priests. He felt guilty because it was his meeting with Ahimelech that put this priest in danger- it was the meeting not the deception that endangered him. David remembered Doeg the Edomite spying on them. He accepted responsibility for the deaths of the priests. He could not change what had happened, but he could give shelter to Abiathar and he did (22:23).

In the providence of God, David now had a prophet and a priest among his followers, while Saul had neither. These men would enable David to know the will of God, and knowing the will of God made fighting battles, and life in general, possible for David, as it does for us.

**David delivers and is delivered**  Text: 1Samuel 23

Can you recall a time when the Lord delivered you from a difficult situation or provided for you when you were in great need? Did his providence come directly, or through another person? I tell the story of a missionary nurse walking home one night from the hospital. She was walking along a narrow mountain path, as she did every day. But the monsoon rains had been heavy. A flash of lightning showed that the path just ahead had disappeared in a landslide; she was about to step off a cliff! For myself, I would not be here ministering today if it was not for an encouraging phone call from a friend. So what of your experiences of God’s providence? Or have you been used by the Lord to encourage someone?

When Jonathan assured David of Saul’s intention to murder him, David fled to the priests at Nob, then to the Philistine city of Gath, then to the cave of Adullam, then to Moab, and then back to Judah. One priest escaped Saul’s massacre at Nob and joined David at his hiding place in southern Judah (22:20-23, 23:6). While David was in hiding, ‘they’, presumably the people of Keilah or nearby, told David that the Philistines were raiding them and making off with their harvest (23:1). This chapter can be divided into three sections: ‘God’s guidance’, ‘Man’s encouragement’, and ‘God’s providence’.

**1. God’s guidance**

David was not their king (not yet), but the people of Keilah went to David for help when the Philistines came up into their valley to rob their threshing floors (23:1). Keilah was about 12km north-west of Hebron, and just south of Adullam; David knew this country well. David’s militia of four hundred men had grown to about six hundred by this time, but would he be able to take on the Philistine army? Logistics aside, why would David risk himself and his men going to help the people of Keilah? Was it not the responsibility of the king of Israel to defend Israel? The most recent campaign of Israel’s king was the massacre of everyone in an Israelite town called Nob! But the request had come to David so he listened.

David inquired of the Lord regarding this request from Keilah. When David fled from Saul he was living by his own wits; although we do find Psalms containing his prayers at this time. The prophet Gad advised him to return to Judah, and now he has a priest carrying the ephod in his company; mention of this does not come until verse 6 but David’s inquiry of the Lord here in verse 2 was most likely through the priest and the ephod. David wanted to know God’s will regarding this request from the people of Keilah. Specifically, he wanted to know if he should go and attack the Philistines. The Lord answered his prayer in the affirmative: ‘Go and attack the Philistines, and save Keilah’ (23:2).

But David’s men were not sure this was a wise thing to do. After all, they were running from the king, trying to stay out of his sight. To go and fight the Philistines would expose them, not only to the Philistines but to Saul also. David listened to his men; he understood their fears. He agreed to inquire of the Lord a second time. And the Lord again answered David in the affirmative: ‘Arise, go down to Keilah, for I will deliver the Philistines into your hand’ (23:4). Having received divine guidance, and the promise of success, David led his men to Keilah.

In just one verse we are told that David and his men routed the Philistines, striking them with a mighty blow and carrying off their livestock (23:5). So David saved the people and their harvest, for which they were thankful- for a while at least! If the Philistines had plundered their harvest these people would have been left without food, which was the enemies aim of course. The Midianites pursued the same policy in the days of Gideon, destroying crops in order to impoverish the Israelites (Judg 6:6). You will recall Gideon using a fleece to inquire of the Lord at that time.

Having saved the people of Keilah from the Philistines, David and men stayed on in the city; the people could hardly tell them to go back to living in the forest! But when a spy told Saul that David was in Keilah, Saul was delighted. He presumed that his cry of self-pity was answered and God had delivered David into his hand (23:7). It is strange that even ungodly men claim God is with them, and some even resort to prayer when they are in trouble, prayer to an unknown God. Saul pictured David shut up in this walled city, so all he had to do was take his army, surround the city, and capture David. It might take some time, but David would have no way of escape.

Saul had his spies but so did David. He heard that Saul ‘plotted evil against him’ (23:9). But David no longer had to make plans in the dark as it were; he had a priest through whom he could find out God’s will. He asked Abiathar to bring the ephod to him. The ephod would have contained the Uri and Thummin, dice-like objects used to convey the Lord’s answer to prayer (Exod 28:30). David prayed, ‘O Lord God of Israel’. He had heard that Saul was coming to Keilah to capture him but wanted to be certain. He also wanted to know if the people of Keilah would help him or betray him (23:11). We picture the priest using the Urim and Thummin to get an answer from the Lord for David, but only one prayer at a time; the answers came in the form of ‘yes’ or ‘no’. The first answer was ‘yes’, Saul will come down (23:11). David prayed again, asking again if the people of Keilah would betray him, and the answer was ‘yes’, ‘They will deliver you’ (23:12). With this clear guidance from the Lord, David gathered his six hundred men to leave Keilah and go ‘wherever they could go’ (23:13). David was disappointed. His men were probably happy to have a roof over their heads but it would only be a brief respite from caves and bushes. David knew the people lived in fear of Saul taking revenge upon them, as he had done at Nob. Thankfully, Saul turned back when he heard David had escaped, so the people of Keilah were spared for the present (23:13).

David’s use of the ephod, and even Gideon’s use of a fleece to find out the will of God, raises the question of how we find out the will of God. We live under the new covenant of course, but we still believe the Lord has a will for our lives, a good, pleasing and perfect will (Rom 12:2). We are told to renew our minds as we seek to know God’s will. We no longer have prophets, human priests or an ephod, but we do have a great High Priest, Jesus, and God’s Spirit dwelling in our hearts, and we have God’s word, the Bible. Renewing our minds means listening to God’s word and to God’s Spirit, and not listening to the world. It means engaging in prayer, prayer in which we ask God to show us his will, and listen for his answer.

**2. Man’s encouragement**

David moved back to ‘strongholds in the wilderness’, to hills in the desert of Ziph (23:14). Ziph was some 8km south-east of Hebron. Saul remained on the lookout for an opportunity to capture and kill David, but David was proving too ‘crafty’ and ready to move quickly (23:22). The narrator tells us that although Saul searched for him every day, ‘God did not deliver him into his hand’ (23:14). David was the Lord’s anointed and his life was in God’s hands. David took his anointing seriously and trusted in the Lord to keep him, but still he ‘worked out his salvation’ as it were. And he still accepted advice and encouragement from men and women he trusted.

In an interlude filled with irony, we see Saul’s son finding David in the woods around Ziph (23:16). Jonathan must have had a better network of spies than his father! Moreover, Jonathan went to encourage David, not to harm him. What a contrast between father and son, one selfish, angry and violent, the other unselfish, loving and gentle. The whole of chapter 20 was about Jonathan and David, and their covenant made before the Lord. Here we see Jonathan remaining loyal to this covenant, and risking his own life to search out David. This will prove to be the last time they see each other.

Jonathan went to David to strengthen his hand in God, to ‘put David’s hand into God’s hand’ as it were (23:16). What does this mean? Let us see what Jonathan says. He assured David that Saul, his father, would not find him. Jonathan must have felt great shame when he came to the realisation that Saul did want David dead. I guess he was assuring David that he had been careful not to be followed on his long journey from Jerusalem. Jonathan then assures David that he will be king over Israel, an assurance based on David’s anointing, we presume. What did Jonathan mean by saying, ‘I will be next to you’? Was he simply reminding David that he had relinquished any claim to the throne (18:4), or did he see himself serving under King David? Jonathan did not get to see the day of David’s coronation.

‘So the two of them made a covenant before the Lord’ (23:18). They remembered and renewed the covenant they had made before the Lord. They would remain loyal to each other and each other’s children all the days of their life. Jonathan reminds us of Barnabas, the ‘son of encouragement’, who brought Saul to Antioch and joined him in mission. The Book of Acts follows the ministry of Paul rather than Barnabas. David needed encouragement at this particular time, so the Lord sent Jonathan. David had escaped betrayers in Keilah, and would soon come close to being captured by Saul. What a comfort it must have been to see this loyal friend, to hear his words and to renew their covenant- like an oasis in the desert. Their parting must have been painful. We also note that Jonathan’s comfort was with words of truth and sincerity; he was speaking the truth in love. Today we hear so many meaningless words of encouragement; we even have professional counsellors and encouragers. Jonathan was no professional, and nor was Barnabas. They were the real thing, so let us be the real thing, men and women who encourage one another, and strengthen one another’s hand in God.

**3. God’s providence**

While David was in the desert of Ziph, the Ziphites went to Saul at Gibeah to betray him. Saul felt safe among the Benjamites in Gibeah. Jonathan had come down to encourage David but the locals, people of Judah, went up to betray him. They knew where David and his men were camping and told Saul in some detail; there was a hill to the ‘south of Jeshimon’ (23:19). What motivated the Ziphites to betray David? Was it the prospect of a reward? Was it fear of Saul’s revenge? What did they have to fear compared to Jonathan! These betrayers invited Saul to come down to their place and they would deliver David into his hand (23:20).

Saul’s reply to the Ziphites is very interesting. He firstly takes the name of the Lord in vain in blessing them in the name of the Lord (23:21). In a display of self-pity, he thanks them for their compassion on him. Few were showing Saul compassion, for obvious reasons. Secondly, Saul asks the Ziphites for further proof of David’s whereabouts. Disturbed and desperate men get suspicious when anyone shows them compassion. Saul speaks of David as being crafty; in truth he was afraid of David because the Lord was with him (18:12). Most people were with David, but not the Ziphites. Thirdly, Saul brags to the Ziphites, and to himself, that he will search for David throughout all the clans of Judah (23:23).

The Ziphites set off for home with Saul following them. But David and his men had moved 8km to the south of Ziph, to the Desert of Maon. He was in this place as Saul and his army closed in on him. David and his men were on one side of the mountain, and Saul and his soldiers on the other. David was trying to get away but Saul was surrounding him (23:26). Was David done for? How would he escape? We have been assured that David was in God’s hands, and Jonathan assured David of this truth. But David was surrounded by hostile forces with no way of escape. Yet he was till praying to the Lord: ‘Behold, God is my helper’ (Ps 54:4). ‘But a messenger came to Saul’ (23:27). God would pronounce the last ‘but’! God sent the Philistines to attack Israel. It was not the first time they came up to attack, but the timing of this attack was ordained by almighty God, the God who heard David’s prayer, and hears your prayer also when you cry to him! Remember, God is sovereign in all things, including the nations and their rulers, and all who worship other gods.

When Saul got the news of the Philistines invading Israel, he left off his pursuit of David to go and fight them. The prospect of Philistines taking over town after town across Israel was more of a concern than David - maybe someone was advising this crazed king. And so the Lord saved David from what seemed like certain death at the hands of Saul. He saved him through an act of providence, the divine ordaining of events by which God saves those who cry to him (Shorter Catechism Q 11).

**David refuses to harm the Lord’s anointed** Text: 1Samuel 24

When the Lord took his Spirit from Saul, a distressing spirit from the Lord troubled him. The Lord gave his Spirit to David when Samuel anointed him as Israel’s new king. Saul became afraid of David when he saw the Lord was with him. He became paranoid, fearing that David might launch a *coup-de-tat* at any time. His son Jonathan, and the priest Ahimelech, assured Saul that this was not true, but he was not convinced. Here in chapter 24 David himself assures Saul he is not trying to harm him, but in his sick mind Saul goes off unchanged. The focus of this chapter however, is not so much on the sick-minded Saul as on David, a man after God’s own heart (13:14).

In this chapter we will witness a man walking close to the Lord, a man trusting in the Lord rather than worldly wisdom and human strength. David refuses to harm King Saul in this chapter, and again in chapter 26. In chapter 25 a wise woman keeps David from taking matters into his own hands when offended.

With the help of a priest and the ephod, David escaped Saul at Keilah. When the Ziphites betrayed him he narrowly escaped Saul; the Lord intervened by sending the Philistines to draw Saul away. David and his six hundred men fled to En Gedi, an oasis midway down the western edge of the Dead Sea. According to the Song of Solomon 1:14, there were vineyards at En Gedi, but the place was surrounded by desert. Around this oasis were many caves, useful hiding places and even homes for refugees like David and his men. Saul’s network of spies soon found David at En Gedi and reported back to Saul after he returned from fighting the Philistines. He must have been successful in expelling them from Israel, but when we get to the last chapter we will find that Saul falls victim to the Philistines. David was not to know this of course, as Saul kept pursuing him. Here in chapter 24 we will see David sparing Saul’s life, submitting to God’s will, and swearing not to wipe out Saul’s family.

**1. Spares Saul’s life**

After dealing with the Philistine threat, Saul resumed his hunt for David; he almost had him in the Desert of Maon. David was now in En Gedi, so Saul set out with a party of three thousand soldiers, outnumbering David’s militia by five to one. Saul reached the sheepfolds by the road; these were enclosures or caves where shepherds put their sheep at night for protection (24:2, 3). King Saul decided to use one of these caves as a toilet; presumably he went into the darkness alone. As he squatted there in his royal dress, David and his men saw him; they were hiding deeper in this very cave.

Here was David’s opportunity to kill the man who was trying to kill him! David had dodged Saul’s spear more than once. Was this not the providence of God? David’s men tried to convince him that it was: “This is the day of which the Lord said to you, ‘Behold, I will deliver him into your hand’” (24:4). There is no other record of the Lord saying this to David. David could have consulted the priest with the ephod but time was short. With his men urging him to kill Saul, David crept up behind him, sword in hand. What David did with his sword was cut a corner off Saul’s robe (24:4).

David, this man after God’s own heart, knew it would be wrong to kill Saul at this time. David was not a pacifist- he had killed hundreds of Philistines - but he was not a violent man. More particularly, David did not take vengeance into his own hands. He says this clearly in verse 12. It is written, ‘Vengeance belongs to the Lord’ (Deut 32:35, Rom 12:19). But Saul was ready to kill David! Yes, but the word of God does not change, and is not for us to interpret it as we might like. David did not need a priest or prophet to know God’s will because it is written in the Scriptures.

It would have been common sense for David to strike Saul then and there, and solve all his problems, but David did not believe in common sense. David believed in what is written. Did David believe that even if he was killed by Saul, God would ultimately deliver him on the Day of the Lord? Why not? Yet because he had the anointing of the Lord, he probably believed he would become king of Israel one day.

Not only does vengeance belong to the Lord, but Saul was the Lord’s anointed (24:6). David was not to know that the Spirit of Lord had departed from Saul. He knew that Saul was the anointed king of Israel and he respected him, despite his wickedness (24:13). To attack the Lord’s anointed was tantamount to attacking the Lord himself. ‘To touch, defile, or attack an anointed one was to approach the Lord himself and to seek to defile, harm, or remove the Lord from his rightful place’ writes one commentator.

David was stricken with guilt for even cutting a corner off Saul’s robe (24:5). He confessed this to his men but they did not understand. David had to restrain them with firm words to stop them taking matters into their own hands with Saul seemingly delivered into their hands here in the cave (24:7). Do you understand the thinking of David, thinking governed by the word of God, not by common sense? Or would you have reasoned, along with David’s men, that this was the providence of God, that this was the time to take vengeance on a vile and wicked enemy?

Jesus was tempted to take a shortcut in obtaining the kingdoms of this world. He had been led into the wilderness where the devil tempted him, urging him to bow down to the devil and all the kingdoms of the world would be his (Mat 4:8, 9). God promised his Son all these kingdoms (Ps 2:8, 9), but there was no shortcut to glory, and certainly no following the way of Satan. So let us not be looking for shortcut in our way to heaven but be carefully listening to God’s word, as we learn from David, and from the book called ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’.

Why was David conscience stricken about cutting a corner off Saul’s robe? He had obviously come close to doing more than this! Maybe David saw his act as symbolic of tearing Saul’s kingdom from him by force. The Lord had already done this (15:28), but it was not for David to be taking matters into his own hands. Even so, this piece of Saul’s robe turned out to valuable in proving to Saul that David had spared his life, and indeed, had no desire to harm the Lord’s anointed.

**2. Submitting to God’s way**

Having finished his ‘business’, Saul got up and walked out of the cave. David followed him, calling out, ‘My Lord the king!’ (24:8). Saul stopped and turned around to find David bowing before him, bowing out of respect for a man and his office, not in worship. Saul had become convinced that David was out to get him; he spoke of this often (22:8, 13). David tries to assure Saul that this was not true. Here was David himself saying he meant no harm to Saul, and indeed, proving this to be the case as he explained what has just happened inside the cave. David held up the cloth he had cut from Saul’s robe to prove just how close he had been to Saul, and that with his sword in hand (24:11).

David explained that he would not lift his hand against Saul because he was the Lord’s anointed (24:10). He told Saul he had not sinned against him, nor was he plotting a rebellion. He was simply fleeing for his life. So why was Saul hunting him to kill him (24:11). David was no more of a threat than a dead dog, or even a flea on that dog? (24:14). As David declared his innocence, he also declared, ‘Let the Lord judge between me and you, and let the Lord avenge me on you’ (24:12). David submitted himself into God’s hands, to wait upon the Lord for judgment. He repeats this conviction, as he repeats his assurance that, ‘My hand shall not be against you’ (24:12, 13).

In telling Saul he was letting the Lord judge between them, David was reminding Saul that he also would come under divine judgment. Let him not forget that ‘wickedness proceeds from the wicked’ (24:13). David refers to this as an ancient proverb; it is an eternal truth. Jesus said, ‘By their fruit you will know them’ (Mat 7:20). Saul was guilty of murdering holy men of God, not to mention women and children. He had innocent blood on his hands and killing David would only add to his wicked deeds. David’s final words to Saul express how he trusted the Lord to judge justly, and deliver him out of Saul’s wicked hands (24:15).

David’s refusal to take vengeance into his own hands did not stop him pleading his case before the Lord, and calling upon the Lord to take vengeance on his enemies, even on King Saul. Many Psalms express ‘imprecation’, a call upon the Lord to judge his enemies, David’s enemies being the Lord’s enemies: ‘He will repay my enemies for their evil. Cut them off in Your truth’ (Ps 54:5); David prayed this when the Ziphites betrayed him (Ps 54). Imprecation, the call for God to judge the wicked, is also found in Psalms 58:6-9 and 139:19-24. Is it wrong to pray for the Lord to judge the wicked? It is certainly better than taking vengeance ourselves! Jesus prayed for the Lord to forgive his enemies (Luke 23:34), but he knew, as we do, that forgiveness is only for those who repent and believe in Jesus. Even as we call upon sinners to repent and be forgiven, and pray that they will do so, we remind them of the consequences of continuing in their wicked ways; surely this is being honest and transparent.

**3. Swearing on oath to Saul**

This subheading refers to a plea by Saul for David not to wipe out Saul’s family when he becomes king. Yes, Saul knew David would become king of Israel (24:20). But as Saul emerged from the cave with David behind him, he was startled to hear what had happened in the cave. Having just escaped death, he was brought to tears. If it had been anyone other than David holding a sword over him, he would have been dead!

After recognising David, he called him ‘My son’, a huge change from the contemptuous, ‘son of Jesse’ (24:16). Saul composed himself and spoke to David saying, ‘You have rewarded me with good, whereas I have rewarded you with evil’ (24:17). David could not call Saul ‘good’ because he wasn’t; he had said to Saul, ‘Wickedness proceeds from the wicked’ (24:13). Saul, on the other hand, had to acknowledge that goodness proceeds from the good, and that a good tree bears good fruit. David showed remarkable grace in returning good for evil. David was prefiguring Christ, or what Christ said in the Sermon on the Mount: ‘Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you’ (Mat 5:44).

You may find it difficult to understand that such sound theology could come from the lips of a wicked man like Saul, but remember how the Lord spoke to Balaam through his donkey! A paranoid person like Saul is not devoid of emotion or of times of clear thinking.

Saul could even acknowledge that the Lord had delivered him from the hands of David, whom he considered his enemy and therefore wanting to kill him. He even prayed for the Lord to reward David (24:19). Saul could not really understand why David let him escape (24:19). The wicked person finds grace hard to understand, but it impacts their heart nevertheless. Sinners find it hard to understand the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in salvation. They think they can save themselves, or at least have to contribute to towards their salvation. But if you have been saved by grace through faith, you will feel a bit like Saul at this moment; I am alive when I should have been dead, and all because of one man who chose to show me grace.

Saul secondly confesses to David that he knows he will become king (24:20). He must have been the last person in Israel to realise that David would become king; even the Philistines knew this (21:11). But in his disturbed state of mind Saul did not accept the will of God. He chose to fight against the will of God. David may have been comforted to hear this confession of Saul, but he knew better than to take this man at his word. Despite this confession, and even the tears, we do not see true repentance. His, ‘my son’, and his, ‘you are more righteous than me’, and his, ‘you shall surely be king’ do not lead to him embracing David with tears of repentance. Repentance means to turn around, not simply to feel sorry for yourself.

The third and final point of Saul’s reply to David was a selfish request for David not to wipe out his family when he became king. David has already made such a promise to Jonathan (20:15). Concern for the life of one’s children is natural, but with Saul it was as much, or more, of a concern for his name. It is the mark of a worldly man that he is concerned for his name after his death, and even before! David graciously swore on oath to Saul that he would not wipe out his family when he became king. And so Saul went home and David remained in the desert because David did not discern true repentance on the part of King Saul.

**David tempted to take vengeance** Text: 1Samuel 25

‘Now there was a man in Maon… the man was very rich…the man was Nabal’ (25:2). We have just read a very interesting story about a foolish man, his wise and beautiful wife, and a young soldier who ends up with this woman as his wife. It is a story that Hollywood would love, except for one thing; the Lord actually kills the husband not the young soldier. This story is not simply about human actions and reactions; it is about the Lord overruling in the affairs of people.

This said, we still ask why this story is in our Bible. David had been anointed king by Samuel, who we are told died and was buried at Ramah as this chapter begins. We had almost forgotten about God’s prophet, but he still living in Ramah until this time. Samuel had led Israel before anointing two kings. Israel was left without a prophet; how would Saul communicate with the God of Israel without prophet or priest?

Back to this story and why it is in the Bible. There is no mention of Saul, who has been chasing David in the last six chapters, and continues this chase in the next chapter. Is this chapter simply a respite for David and for us? We do note that in the previous chapter David refused to take vengeance on Saul, and he does the same in the next chapter. Yet here in chapter 25 he marches off, bent on taking vengeance on a rich fool who has offended him. Nabal reminds us of Saul although he is not the Lord’s anointed.

The ‘man after God’s own heart’ was saved from sinning in the nick of time by a woman sent by the Lord, in what we have referred to as the sovereign God’s overruling in the affairs of people, or divine providence. The story is long but interesting; it is full of dialogue. Our subheadings include: ‘David’s request refused’, ‘Abigail’s timely intercession’, ‘Advice heeded’, and, ‘Vengeance is the Lord’s’.

**1. David’s request refused**

The story begins with a description of the characters involved. These are, Nabal, his wife Abigail, and David. Apart from later genealogical references, Nabal and Abigail are not referred to outside this chapter. David was in southern Judah hiding from Saul; he was last at En Gedi. Also living in this region, in Maon as well as Carmel, was a rich grazier called Nabal; not that riches made him happy or generous! He was ‘harsh and evil in his doings’ (25:3). He was a descendant of Caleb but genetics did not make him godly or generous either. His wife, on the other hand, was intelligent and beautiful. She knew her husband to be true to his name, which means ‘fool’ in Hebrew (25:25).

It was shearing time, which was like harvest time for a farmer. In anticipation of selling lots of wool, Nabal was having a feast. This is where David enters the story. He heard that Nabal was shearing his sheep and now feasting. So he sent ten young men to Carmel to ask if Nabal might be kind enough to share some of his feast with David and his men. It was a request, not a demand for protection money. David was known to him, or at least to his shepherds, who had been in the desert where David and his men were hiding. David’s men had been good towards these shepherds (25:7, 15), so it was appropriate that Nabal share some of his feast with David and his men; it was a matter of returning good for good.

David’s men greeted Nabal politely: ‘Peace to you, peace to your family, and peace to all that is yours!’ (25:6). They conveyed David’s message in which he explained to Nabal how his men were good to his shepherds and took nothing from them as they grazed their flocks around Carmel. On this basis David requested Nabal share some of his feast with him and his men: ‘whatever comes to your hand’ was his simple and polite request (25:8).

Nabal’s reply to David’s men was anything but polite. He acted as if David was some vagabond or a runaway slave. David was a ‘nobody’ as far as Nabal was concerned. Nabal pretended he did not know David but then calls him the ‘son of Jesse’, a term of contempt that we have heard only from Saul and his murdering servant Doeg. Nabal reminds us of Saul in various ways, including his disregard for the future king of Israel. The mention of Samuel’s death in verse 1 reminds us that Samuel actually anointed David king.

Following Nabal’s rude response to David’s request, the young men returned to David empty handed. They also reported everything the rich man said about David, that he was a renegade and a ‘nobody’ who would get nothing from Nabal. David took the insult to heart; he got very angry. Nobody likes to be treated as a ‘nobody’, and David was no exception. David’s message of peace, peace, peace, in verse 6 turns to words of action in verse 13: sword, sword, and sword. David took up his sword and told four hundred of his men to do the same. Two hundred stayed with their gear while the rest set off at once to deal with this rude man who had ridiculed David, and that before his own men.

**2. Abigail’s intercession**

In the providence of God, one of Nabal’s servants left the feast to tell Abigail about her husband’s treatment of David’s young men; call him a whistle-blower if you like. This young man realised the consequences of Nabal’s rudeness and refusal, and felt compelled to do something. We are not told his name but he was the first person in God’s plan to ‘save the day’ for Nabal and his family, but especially for David. This servant confirmed what David had reported to Nabal, namely that he and his men had been good to the shepherds and not taken anything from them; in fact, they helped them, maybe deterring others from raiding them (25:15, 16). He also reminded Abigail that her husband was a brute of a man who listened to no one. It takes courage to tell a woman that her husband is a scoundrel or ‘son of Belial’, but Abigail had to agree. The servant urged her to take action before they all suffered at the hands of David and his men (25:17).

Abigail knew what she had to do to save her household; she had to intercede to stop David. She had to pay for her husband’s sin. Abigail quickly bagged supplies of bread, meat and wine, of raisins and figs, and loaded these on donkeys (25:18). She sent servants ahead with these gifts, hoping to placate David. She did not tell her husband; he was drunk anyway (25:19). Abigail followed the donkeys with the supplies, riding on her own donkey, hoping to intercept David on his mission of revenge. She was being diplomatic, being a peace maker, peace that would come at the cost of her intercession.

Before Abigail meets David we are reminded of David’s mood as he hurries to deal with Nabal. He had been good to Nabal’s shepherds as they wandered the wilderness, but Nabal was repaying evil for good (25:21). This is exactly what Saul was doing (24:17). Being rewarded with evil for good is hard to take, and this time David was not going to take it! He vowed not to leave a living male in Nabal’s household by morning (25:22).

David’s reaction and planned revenge is a natural human reaction, but not the reaction of a man or woman of God. The Bible teaches, “‘Vengeance is mine’ says the Lord, ‘I will repay’” (Deut 32:35, Rom 12:19). Jesus teaches, ‘Love your enemies …do good to those who hate you’ (Mat 5:44). We are to return good for evil. David knew this but he was sorely tempted to do otherwise at this point in time. We might also remember how Jesus, our saviour and Lord, who only ever did good, was treated so badly in this world. ‘Consider him who endured such hostility from sinners against himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls’ (Heb 12:3).

When the beautiful Abigail saw the handsome David coming she quickly dismounted and bowed before him (25:23). But there was no romance in this meeting. The mission of David was to murder the man who happened to be her husband, and her mission was to stop David from doing this and sinning against the Lord. Abigail very humble asks ‘my lord’ David to hear her out as she explains the situation, and personally takes the blame for the offence felt by David. She is more concerned that David not sin than she is for her foolish husband. She explains that her husband is as his name indicates, a foolish man. Besides, she did not see David’s young men when they came (25:25).

Abigail solemnly urges David not to be a foolish man like her husband, which he will be if he goes off and takes revenge. Let David consider that she was sent by the Lord to stop him from taking vengeance into his own hands and getting the blood of innocent men on his hands (25:26). Abigail asks that her generous gift be given to David’s men as she pleads for forgiveness, not for her husband but for herself (25:28). Abigail accepted responsibility for the offence against David even though she was not responsible. You who believe know how Jesus takes your sin upon himself and pleads with the Father for forgiveness. You know Jesus as the only mediator or intercessor between God and man (1Tim 2:5).

Abigail knew the Lord, and knew David knew the Lord; what a blessing it is to speak to, and counsel, men and women who fear the Lord. She also knew that David was the Lord’s anointed and that his house would endure because the Lord was fighting for him (25:28, 30). Abigail turns out to be an encourager like Jonathan. She knew that Saul was pursuing David but assures him that the Lord will ‘sling out’ his enemies and establish David as ruler over Israel (25:29,20). Abigail knows this because she knows the Lord, the Lord who punishes the wicked and preserves those who fear and obey him. Knowing the Lord and fearing him is the beginning of wisdom. Abigail was certainly a wise woman! She will be the second woman to save David; remember his first wife Michal who helped him escape her father Saul. Abigail will save David from a guilty conscience if he heeds her advice and turns back from the path of revenge. Abigail ends her words to David with a plea to be remembered when David becomes king.

**3. Advice heeded**

David acknowledged that the Lord had sent Abigail to speak to him just in time (25:32). He blessed her in the name of the Lord. He accepted her timely advice in urging him to reconsider what he was about to do. He confesses that he was about to take revenge on her family by killing every male among them; Abigail would have had sons that David was about to murder!

With a massive sigh of relief from David, from Abigail, and from us as readers, we hear David saying to Abigail, ‘Go in peace to your house. See, I have heeded your voice and respected your person’ (25:35). Nabal was renowned for not listening to anyone, but David was ready to listen to advice, even from a woman!

**4. Vengeance is the Lord’s**

Abigail went home after interceding for her husband and averting his death at the hands of David and his men. She found Nabal still feasting like a king. He was drunk so she did not say anything till the next morning when he had sobered up. When she told Nabal about David being on his way to kill him, ‘his heart died within him and he became like a stone’ (25:37). If this was a heart attack it did not kill him immediately; he died after ten days. His death, we are told, was at the hand of the Lord: ’The Lord struck Nabal, and he died’ (25:38).

When David heard that Nabal was dead, he again exclaimed, ‘Blessed be the Lord’ (25:39); ‘again’ because he said this when Abigail urged him not to take matters into his own hands. Vengeance belongs to the Lord and this is what David saw. The Lord vindicated David; he did not have to lift a hand, and to do so would have been a sin. David was tempted but he did not sin because someone came to remind him that he was about to commit sin. Has anyone stopped you from committing a sin? Have you stopped anyone for sinning against the Lord? ‘He who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins’ (James 5:20).

Realising that Abigail, the wise and beautiful woman whose advice he heeded, was now a widow, David sent a proposal of marriage, and she agreed (25:39, 40). She respectfully bowed before David’s servants and accepted his proposal saying, ‘Here is your maidservant, a servant to wash the feet of the servants of the Lord’ (25:41). What an amazingly gracious woman! What an amazingly gracious person!

So this rich, wise, beautiful, and gracious widow, set off with her own maidservants to become David’s wife. This chapter ends with reference to two other wives, Ahinoam of Jezreel and Michal, David’s first wife whom Saul had since given in marriage to a fellow called Palti, no doubt as a reward; she had been given to David as reward but they did love each other.

**David spares Saul’s life again** Text: 1Samuel 26

David had already had an opportunity to kill the man who was set on killing him, namely Saul, king of Israel. When Saul was using a cave as a toilet, David, sword in hand, crept up behind him and cut a corner off his robe. He knew it would be wrong to harm the Lord’s anointed; that was in chapter 24. Saul does not get a mention in chapter 25 but David continues to grow in faith and understanding of God’s word, particularly the words, ‘Vengeance is mine says the Lord, I will repay’ (Deut 32:35).

Saul shows up again here in chapter 26, along with the Ziphites (26:1). We read of the Ziphites at the end of chapter 23; in fact, the words we have read today are similar to those of verse 19 of chapter 23. This clan that lived in the desert to the south east of Hebron, came to Saul at Gibeah to tell him that David was again hiding in their region, in the hill of Hachilah (26:1, cf.23:19). These people were betraying David because they were afraid of Saul, or because Saul was rewarding them.

Why was Saul so ready to march his men all the way to this place when he had done so before and failed to capture David? Had he forgotten that time? More likely, he remembered how close he came to David before having to leave to fight the Philistines. This time Saul did not wait for verification from the Ziphites, but immediately set off with his standing army of three thousand men. Saul was soon back in the place where he had come so close to capturing David. He camped by the road near the hill of Hachilah (26:3). David was indeed in this desert region, but he had his own spies who confirmed that Saul had come down again and told David where Saul was camped; and army of three thousand could hardly hide themselves! What happens next, as recorded here in the Bible, we will look at under three subheadings: ‘David snatches Saul’s spear’, ‘David rebukes Saul’s bodyguard’, and, ‘David reasons with Saul’.

**1. David snatches Saul’s spear**

After being informed that Saul was camped nearby, David went to investigate for himself. Being very late in the day, he saw soldiers all bunked down for the night with Saul at the centre of the camp. Abner, Saul’s general, was next to him. For some reason David decided to sneak into the camp that very night. Because Saul’s army outnumbered his militia five to one, he knew he had no chance of defeating Saul in battle. He could have kept running but came up with another plan. It was a very audacious and risky plan but he was trusting the Lord to help him. Maybe he recalled the story of Gideon and how he defeated the Midianites (Judg 7).

David had two men with him as he surveyed Saul’s camp, one a Hittite man, and other the brother of Joab, who would become his general. Joab, Abishai and also Asahel were sons of David’s sister Zeruiah; they were somewhat bloodthirsty men (2Sam 6:9-10). David asks for just one to accompany him and Abishai quickly volunteered (26:6). It was a risky plan and David did not want to force anyone to go with him.

So David and Abishai crept into Saul’s camp while Saul and all his men slept. Maybe David prayed about this plan; in any case, we are told that the Lord caused a deep sleep to fall upon Saul and his men (26:12). David’s aim was to get close enough to Saul to snatch his spear. Saul was so paranoid he slept with his spear, not in his hand but stuck in the ground hear his head (cf. 22:6). This was the spear that David had twice dodged!

Abishai was loyal to David and thought it was his duty to put an end to the man who was hunting David to kill him. He even reasoned that, ‘God has delivered your enemy into your hand this day’ (26:8). We are reminded of the men who urged David to kill Saul when he was in the cave- Abishai may well have been one of them (24:4)! If so, he had not learned that David was a man after God’s own heart, a man who listened to God’s word and not to common sense, or to common sense dressed up as divine providence. Abishai assured David he could pin Saul to the ground with a single thrust of his spear (26:8).

But David stopped Abishai, reminding him that Saul was still the anointed king of Israel, the Lord’s anointed (26:9). To strike the Lord’s anointed was tantamount to striking the Lord himself; it would be a serious sin which the Lord would surely avenge. How careful we must be in listening to common sense, whether it comes from within, or from other people. Often common sense is from the devil. David had learned that vengeance always belongs to the Lord, not man.

David’s understanding of this truth, as it is revealed in Scripture, grew through his experience in the previous chapter where Abigail intervened to stop him taking vengeance on Nabal. Shortly after David’s planned murder of Nabal, ‘The Lord struck Nabal and he died’ (25:38). David now understood that the Lord could similarly strike Saul at any moment with some sickness, or death by other means, without David’s help; death on the battle field was common, or maybe he would die a natural death (26:10). David did not know- all he could do was pray, as we see in his psalms of imprecation.

What David did know was that vengeance belongs to the Lord. Have you learned this lesson? It is not easy to resist the temptation to take things into our own hands when dealing with people who oppose us. I recall wanting to get someone out of a house and resisting the temptation to do something more than pray. In time the Lord moved them out! What about you? What is your experience of seeing the Lord take vengeance to establish justice? When it comes to wicked rulers like Saul, and many others down through history until today, I recall the prayer of a missionary lady who prayed, ‘Lord, improve him or remove him’. Did David still hope for improvement in the thinking and conduct of Saul?

David did not know the future, although he knew he was anointed by Samuel and would become king one day. What he did know was that it would be a sin to kill Saul in cold blood, or in this case, while he was sleeping (26:11). Abishai was amazed, but he obeyed David and took Saul’s spear and water bottle from beside his head without any violence. The two of them then quickly and quietly got away from the camp before anyone woke up. We are told that a ‘deep sleep from the Lord had fallen on them’, on Saul and all his men (26:12).

**2. David rebukes Saul’s bodyguard**

When David and Abishai were a safe distance from Saul’s camp, they went up on a hill from where David yelled out to Abner, Saul’s bodyguard and army general. Abner was also Saul’s cousin. Abner did not recognise the voice echoing across the valley, but Saul did when he woke up (26:14, 17). David’s shouting was to rebuke Abner for not properly protecting the king, the Lord’s anointed. He told Abner to check for Saul’s spear and water bottle (26:16). David was probably waving these objects in the air as he taunted Abner, saying he should be court-martialled for dereliction of duty. In fact, Saul’s whole army should be ashamed for failing in their duty.

Was David trying to set Saul against Abner and his men? Saul was not averse to spearing men who failed him- but he had no spear! Saul, was listening to David shouting at Abner. Seeing his spear in David’s hand, he realised how close he had come to death. It was a case of *déjà vu,* with Saul again realising he should have been dead- but David spared him. Why?

**3. David reasons with Saul**

Saul was without his spear when he came out of the cave to be confronted by David. He is again without his spear as David, holding Saul’s spear, called to him from a safe distance. Saul woke to hear David’s voice and was shocked to see his spear in David’s hand. In smooth talk he called David ‘my son’ (26:17). Knowing that he had Saul’s attention, David asks an obvious question: ‘Why are you hunting me like a criminal’? David wanted to know what he had done or said to deserve such ‘attention’ from Saul. He did not wait for an answer from the paranoid king, a man who struggled with reality and with the truth. ‘Communication with such a man was virtually impossible’. Instead David presented Saul with some options and explains how to deal with these. Saul goes on to admit his sin and call for David to return, but David had heard it all before, empty words of sorrow and confession and assurance (26:21).

Firstly, if the Lord has stirred Saul up to punish David for some wrong then David was ready to confess and make an offering to the Lord (26:19). This was, and is, the appropriate way to deal with sin. Others may show us our sin but they should allow confession and forgiveness. If we refuse, then punishment is justified. Secondly, if it is men who have stirred Saul up to pursue David, or if it is his own imagination, then let such men be ‘cursed before the Lord’ (26:19). David calls for God to judge such men for their wickedness because slander is sin.

What is David complaining about at the end of verse 19? David was not only complaining about Saul hunting him to kill him but about Saul driving him out of Israel; in fact, it is the second fear that looms largest. David fled to Gath and then to Moab, places where worship of the Lord was not possible in those days; in the next chapter he will return to Gath. The prophet Gad advised him to return to Judah, probably for political purposes. But David is sharing with Saul concerns more religious than political. ‘To be cut off from the ordinances of public worship is David’s most severe grief’ (Davis). It is as if Saul and his cohort were telling David, ‘Go, serve other gods’ (26:19). They were stopping David from ‘sharing in the inheritance of the Lord’ (26:19).

For David and all the people of God at that time, worship was focussed on the temple or tabernacle. Every male was duty bound to go to the house of God with sacrifices and offerings at each of the three annual feasts (Deut 16:16). This was David’s inheritance. If he was in a foreign country they would be worshipping other gods. See how difficult it was for Daniel and his fellow Jews to worship the Lord while in exile. Many Jews actually gave up worshipping the Lord while in Babylon.

We, of course, know that we can worship the Lord in any place, but still it is not easy to do so when surrounded by unbelievers worshipping other gods. When we lived Trangie we were the only believers in town for a time- apart from a young man with muscular dystrophy. We heard of believers starting a Baptist church in Narromine, almost 50kms away, so, being desperate for true Christian fellowship, we started attending this church, taking this young man with us. Are you as desperate as David to be in the Lord’s house with the Lord’s people, and that every time the doors are open for worship? Is it as obvious to you as it was to David that failing to attend the house of God, and the means of grace, would threaten his relationship with the Lord and his people? Are you saying to yourself, ‘let me go and serve other gods?’

Saul confessed, ‘I have sinned’ and ‘played the fool’, like Nabal the fool. David, as we have seen, was encouraged by the Lord’s dealing with wicked Nabal. When would he deal with wicked Saul? David would not be deceived by Saul’s empty confession. He told Saul to send someone to get his sword; David had made his point! He could not trust Saul but he could trust the Lord to ‘repay every man for his righteousness and faithfulness’ - or lack thereof (26:23). David had acted righteously and he knew the Lord would reward him one day because the Lord is the righteous judge.

In the hearing of Saul, David prayed to the Lord, ‘Let Him deliver me out of all my tribulation’ (26:24). David described himself as a flea and a hunted partridge in relation to Saul. But his life was valued by the Lord just as your life and mine are valued by the Lord. This means that nothing can happen to you outside the will of God. Saul assured David he would prevail and do great things but David did not listen to assurances given by such a wicked man (26:25). David went on his way, never to see Saul again.

**David in a dilemma** Text: 1Samuel 27:1-28:2

We are often shocked to hear of the sins of someone we considered to be a saint, to see men or women we admired being disgraced by revelation of their corrupt or immoral life. We should be careful about ‘idolising’ or ‘beatifying’ anyone of course, apart for our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus committed no sin, but this cannot be said of any of his human ancestors, David included. We know David as a man after God’s own heart, a man whom Samuel anointed king of Israel, and a man given the Spirit of the Lord (16:13).

We have seen David running from the murderous King Saul but refusing to harm the king even when tempted inside the cave, and inside the camp. We might think that with such proofs of God’s providence and protection, David would be confident to remain within Israel. He had been assured of becoming king by Samuel, by Jonathan, by Abigail, and even by Saul. But years on the run were taking their toll; besides, he had responsibility for his family, and some six hundred men and their families.

I am preparing you for a rather shameful period in David’s life, a period of one year and four months spent living among the Philistines. I love Bible biographies because they are so honest; in contrast to most human biographies! No attempt is made to cover up Abraham’s fear and deceptive conduct when he went to Egypt, or Elijah’s fear as he fled from Jezebel despite God’s answer to his prayer on Mt Carmel. No attempt is made to cover up David’s fear and deceptive conduct as he decides to leave Judah and settle among the Philistines. Even so, the story is told without moral judgment. We simply note that there is no mention of God in this chapter. Our subheadings are: ‘David flees to Gath’, ‘Deadly raids and deception’, and ‘Dilemma’.

**1. David flees to Gath**

Some scholars think the chapters we are reading are not in chronological order, but they cannot arrange them any better. With any story telling the focus shifts, as it does in most of the next chapter, but for many chapters now the focus has been on David being on the run from Saul. You will recall that he first fled to Gath in the land of the Philistines. This was logical because the king of Israel was trying to kill him. David was alone at that time; when he was identified he pretended to be mad in order to escape Gath. Sometime later the prophet Gad advised him to go back to Judah (from Moab), and he did. Life back in Judah was hard and dangerous, but he was the anointed king of this land. It is difficult and dangerous for political ‘dissidents’ to remain in their home country but by remaining they retain legitimacy, e.g. Aung San Suu Kyi, Alexei Navally, and others.

With a man like David we have come to expect him to consult a prophet or priest in order to find out the will of God. But what we read is that, ‘David said in his heart’ (27:1). David thought about his predicament and decided that fleeing to Gath was his best option. He feared death at the hand of Saul despite his recent ‘victory’ in taking Saul’s spear and water bottle. David reasoned that if he moved to Philistine territory Saul would not be able to pursue him because this was enemy territory. So far so good! When he fled to Gath, Saul ‘sought him no more’ (27:4). But this will not be the end of the story.

David took all his men and their families as well as his own family, including his two wives, Ahinoam and Abigail, to Gath. He introduced himself to Achish the king. Achish must have been shocked to see David and his men but probably knew how Saul was hunting him to kill him- David would have told him anyway. As we have just said, so far so good! David consulted himself, he used his common sense to protect himself, his family and his men from Saul. But had not the Lord protected him up to this time? What was happening to David’s faith and why did he not consult the Lord in this matter as he usually did? Did David consider the dangers of living in pagan enemy territory?

Many years later the people of Israel lived in a pagan city called Babylon because of God’s judgment, and they struggled to keep on worshipping the Lord. Did David consider such spiritual danger? How often do we, as God’s people, place ourselves in spiritual danger by associating with unbelievers? The Lord may, of course, call us to be witnesses in a pagan society or situation, but David was not called and neither are believers who choose to marry an unbeliever, or partner with a pagan in some business or endeavour.

**2. Deadly raids and deception**

If David was to live in enemy territory he had to very diplomatic in dealing with this king. If he was praying at the time there is no mention here in the narrative, and no mention of him consulting the prophet or priest with the ephod. David thought it best to keep a distance from the Philistine king, so made out to be humble and not demanding of the king’s resources (27:5). The king agreed to give David and his party the town of Ziklag some distance to the south, towards Egypt (27:6). We do not know the precise location but this verse says it actually belonged to the kings of Judah- probably in the region allocated to Simeon. So David and his party settled in Ziklag for a year and four months (27:7).

Tribal people in the northern part of Kenya and surrounds are nomadic cattle herders. Cattle rustling is very common, and often violent. I recall being rather scared when Turkana tribesmen came to a missionary meeting carrying their spears and wearing sharp metal wristbands. The southern part of Israel, the Negev, and down into Sinai, was a dry region over which nomadic tribes roamed, and raided each other. David seems to have joined in this activity.

David went off with his men to raid the Geshurites, the Girzites and the Amalekites (27:8). The Amalekites are known to us as people who attacked Moses when he was coming up from Egypt, and whom Saul attacked but failed to utterly destroy. Saul, was given a divine mandate to attack the Amalekites and destroy them by killing every living person and animal among them (15:3). We do not read of David being given such a mandate. What David did was attack these Gentile or pagan tribes, killing every man and woman but taking the animals for himself and his men (27:9). In ‘holy war’ everything was dedicated to the Lord for destruction. But David took lots of plunder and ‘returned and came to Achish’ (27:9). In this way he kept himself in the good books of this Philistine king. Kings like lots of plunder, especially when it costs them nothing in terms of sweat and blood.

**3. Dilemma**

David may have learnt to trust in the Lord with all his heart but at this point we was leaning on his own understanding, not the Lord (Prov 3:5,6). He had convinced the Philistine king to give him a town to live in but thought he needed to do more to endear himself to this king. He brought the king plunder from his raids. When Achish asked where he had gone on his raids, David thought it best to deceive him. He told Achish that he was raiding tribes in the southern part of Judah and Achish believed him (27:10); he thought David was raiding Israelite towns, thereby making the people of Israel hate him (27:12). In truth, David was attacking tribes and towns allied to the Philistines.

While raiding and plundering towns was part of life in this region in those days, David was doing so with excessive brutality. There is no mention of this being ‘holy war’, so killing every human being was excessive brutality. In fact, we are told why David was killing everyone- it was all part of his deception. He feared any survivors might tell Achish the truth about where he was raiding (27:11). If there is any element of judgment in this narrative surely this is it; David killing innocent people just to stop them talking! And he had to stop them talking because he was telling lies. Yes, this is the Lord’s anointed king of Israel! Reading on, we see how close David came to jeopardising his whole future and the Lord’s calling upon his life. The first two verses of chapter 28 tell us of a great dilemma faced by David as a result of his self-made plans, and leave us there until after the account of Saul and the medium.

David’s deception was so ‘clever’ that the Philistine king told David he and his men must join his army in their next battle. Yes, you guessed it, that battle was against Israel. All the Philistine armies gathered at Aphek, and the Israelites camped at Jezreel- this was the plain in the northern part of Canaan. David’s plan to escape Saul was about to backfire big time. Did he really have to go on raids and bring plunder to this Philistine king? And what about his killing of innocent people to maintain his deception? Did he really need to be living among the enemy? Sure it was more comfortable and he could sleep easy at night, but he sings of the Lord giving him sleep even when surrounded by thousands wanting to kill him (Ps 4:8). At this time David was walking according to his own plans, plans which led him into sinful conduct, and to placing the Lord’s plan for his life in jeopardy.

David’s responded to the decision of Achish that he should join him in war against Israel saying: ‘Surely you know what your servant can do’ (28:2). He was deliberately ambiguous. He would have realised his dilemma, but still there is no mention of God or prayers in this episode of David’s life. If David had said ‘No’ to Achish he would have exposed his deception - and he was in enemy territory! An enthusiastic, ‘Yes’ would mean fighting against the people of God, people over whom he would one day rule.

We all know, or should know, that one lie or one small sin leads to another until soon we become hopelessly entangled in lies and all manner of sin. David had seen the Lord deliver him from Saul but in this moment of weakness trusted in his own understanding, or in common sense, and fled to Gath- this is not to dismiss the great stress under which David was living as a refugee in his own land. Life was easy for a while, as is often the case when we first sin. But one sin led to another until his whole future and God’s plan for his people, which included David of course, was in danger. If your plans ever include sin, no matter how small, flee such plans now. Remember, God’s ways are best; in fact his ways are perfect. God’s ways may not be easy, but they will save you from disaster.

**Saul’s tragic dilemma** Text: 1Samuel 28

In India the date of a federal election is determined by an astrologer. Hindu’s consult an astrologer for all sorts of things, including the best day and hour for a wedding, and the best day for an election. I think the date of the next British elections will be set after consultation with an astrologer. Millions of people consult horoscopes because they want to know the future. They live in fear of what their horoscope says. I don’t know of séances still being conducted in our society, but they became popular with the decline of the church back in the seventies. For true Christians, séances, along with horoscopes and clairvoyants, and all forms of divination, are strictly forbidden, as we see in our readings today.

The people of Israel wanted to have a king like other nations, so the Lord told Samuel to anoint Saul as king. He did so with warnings as to how the king would enrich himself at their expense. There was a specific warning that, ‘You will cry out in that day because of your king… and the Lord will not hear you in that day’ (8:18). It was not long before Saul started disobeying the commands of the Lord spoken through Samuel, and failed to repent (13:13, 15:22). After being told by Samuel that the kingdom would be torn from him and given to another, Saul turned upon David in jealous anger. In his pursuit of David he killed all the priests of the Lord, except Abiathar. In time, Samuel died and was buried in Ramah; he had led the nation as judge and prophet for many years, anointing both Saul, and David.

When Saul was not hunting David, he was defending Israel against the Philistines. At this, the lowest period of his life thus far, David had fled to Philistine territory and was facing his own dilemma, as reported in the opening verses of this chapter. The narrator leaves David’s dilemma for the moment to tell us of a tragic dilemma faced by Saul. The Philistines were on the warpath yet again, and Saul was dead scared; he shook with fear! What was he to do? He was accustomed to getting advice from Samuel, even if he failed to listen. Saul became desperate when his cry to the Lord was met with silence. He went seeking a medium for advice and answers. Samuel was ‘brought up’ by the medium or necromancer for the disguised Saul.

**1. Silence of the Lord**

As background for this episode in Saul’s life we are told two things: firstly, that Samuel the prophet had died, and secondly, that Saul had put all the mediums and spiritists out of the land (28:3, cf.25:1). The original Canaanites worshipped Baal and other gods. They worshipped at hill-top shrines where priests or shamans resided. Ancestors were worshipped and were probably ‘called up’ from time to time.

From the very beginning, Israel, the nation of God’s people, were warned not to practice any form of divination or devil worship. Moses said that anyone who ‘conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead’ must be removed/stoned (Deut 18:11, Lev 20:27). When the people turned away from God these evils reappeared in the land. For some reason, Saul had obeyed the word of God in this particular matter and expelled all the mediums and spiritists (28:3). God provided prophets and priests through whom he answered their prayers. Sometimes he spoke in dreams, like that which Samuel had as a boy. To consult mediums and spiritists was an abomination that offended the Lord.

The time came when the Philistines gathered together an army to attack Israel. They chose to attack from the north, preferring to fight on a plain because they had chariots and Israel didn’t. They gathered first at Aphek, where David was with them, before moving on to Shumen on the northern side of the valley of Jezreel. Saul and his army camped at Gilboa on the southern side, six or seven kilometres away. When Saul looked out at the Philistine army he shook with fear (28:5). They were far better equipped and probably had far more men, although such matters had not deterred Saul when Samuel was with him. But Samuel was dead and buried.

‘Saul inquired of the Lord’ himself, maybe in some prayer ritual, but ‘the Lord did not answer him’. He did not answer ‘by dreams, by Urim, or by the prophets’ (28:6). The Urim, along with the Thummim, was kept in the priest’s ephod. When Saul killed all the priests at Nob and Abiathar escaped to David, he took the ephod with him. Other than Samuel, only Gad is called a prophet, and he was also with David (22:5). So the Lord did not answer Saul. For most of his life, Saul never listened to the Lord anyway but did his own thing; so why should the Lord answer him now?

Saul was like many people today who spend their life ignoring the Lord, but when trouble comes, or they are on their deathbed, they cry to God, hoping he will hear them. But why should he? They come making demands rather than humbling themselves before almighty God anyway. While God is loving and ready to forgive, he does not respond to arrogant human demands. ‘The most hopeless misery in all of life is to be abandoned by God’. Countless men and women with proud hearts have come to this tragic place in their life, and many are fast approaching this point, the point of no return or no redemption.

**2. Seek a medium**

If the Lord will not listen to your arrogant demands, the devil will. Since the Garden of Eden, the devil has prowled around seeking whom he make devour (1Peter 5:8). For too long, Saul had rejected the light, and now he found himself in a dark place, both spiritually and physically. ‘Find me a woman who is a medium that I may go to her and inquire of her’ Saul told his servants (28:7): ‘medium’ or ‘necromancer’ is literally a ‘ghost wife’.

Saul was now looking for an answer from the very evil that he had banished from the land. And, surprise, surprise, his servants knew exactly where to find a medium! Laws will not remove evil from the land when hearts remain bent on evil. That there was a medium at En Dor seems to have been an open secret. En Dor was to the north of Gilboa; in fact, it was up behind where the Philistines were camped. Joshua tells us that the people of Manasseh could not drive the Canaanites out of this town because they were determined to stay (Josh 17:12) - talk about the sins of the fathers!

Saul waited till it was dark, disguised himself by wearing non-royal robes, and set off with servants to find this woman at En Dor (28:8). Saul asked this woman to consult a spirit or conduct a séance and bring up the person he nominated. The woman was understandably cautious with her new client. She reminded him of what Saul had done in Israel- unaware at this point that she was talking to Saul! She would be putting her life on the line in doing what he asked.

Saul, like most ungodly people, was always ready to swear an oath, even by the God they don’t even know. Saul swore to the woman ‘by the Lord’ or by Yahweh, despite his disobedience and the Lord’s silence towards him (28:10). In the Lord’s name he assured her she would not face punishment- even though Saul had punished many of her mates. You may already be asking if what mediums do is real or just magic. Let us continue with the account before trying to answer this question; remember of course, that such practices, real or not, are an abomination before the Lord.

**3. Samuel brought up**

As a medium or necromancer, this woman called up the spirits of dead people and communicated with these spirits. In this case she saw Samuel and ‘cried out with a loud voice’ (28:12). Either she was surprised to see and recognise this particular person, or was surprised that Samuel came up at all. Presumably she had acted upon Saul’s request, and doing what mediums do, she had called for the spirit of Samuel to come up from the dead. Seeing Samuel she realised that her client was Saul; this realization may have added to her distressing cry. If the woman was given to faking things, which may well have been the case, this particular séance was no fake. She saw Samuel and screamed in fear.

Saul was remarkably calm as he tried to calm the woman; he had not seen what she saw (28:13). She told Saul that she saw a spirit coming up out of the earth. Saul asked about his form and she replied, ‘an old man …covered in a mantle’. Saul immediately knew it was Samuel because he wore a prophet’s robe, so bowed his face to the ground (28:14). And so began a conversation between Saul and Samuel who had been brought up from the grave! Saul was looking for advice about going to war with the Philistines, but he heard more than he bargained for; it was not good news for him or the nation.

Samuel initially complained about being disturbed in this way. Saul told him about his dilemma regarding the Philistines and that God had abandoned him. God was not answering him so he had the medium call up Samuel from the grave to tell him what to do! God was silent but Saul would still get an answer; the means of doing so were of no concern to him. It is amazing what people do, and who they listen to, before saying they have an answer from God. We are not told of the apostle Paul encountering mediums, but he did encounter false teachers in the church, and Christians who were taking their words as gospel truth. Some of these tried their hand at performing miracles.

Samuel was aghast that Saul was asking him when he had made the Lord his enemy. He reminded Saul of what he prophesied when he was alive in this world, namely that the Lord had torn his kingdom from him and given it to another, namely David (28:17, 15:28). Samuel had prophesied judgment upon Saul after he failed to utterly destroy the Amalekites and their king, and failed to repent of his disobedience.

Samuel goes on to tell Saul about the Philistines gathered to attack Israel. His words are not at all encouraging. Saul would go into battle the next day knowing that the Israelites would be defeated, and that he himself would die, along with his sons (28:19). The sovereign God eventually spoke to Saul despite his wickedness in consulting a medium. His message was not unexpected. Saul was reminded of his disobedient and wicked ways. He knew he had lost his kingdom. To learn that he would be in the grave with Samuel the next day was only to be expected of a man who refused to humble himself and repent before the Lord.

Saul began the day afraid and filled with terror at the sight of the Philistine army (28:5). That night, in the house of the witch of En Dor, he lay prostrate on the ground, dreadfully afraid because of what the ‘brought up’ Samuel said to him. He was too weak to get up, having eaten nothing all day. The woman had done her job and now wanted him gone. She urged him to eat some bread and go (28:22). Saul refused to eat but his servants, along with the woman, got him to sit up on the bed.

In an act of great hospitality, this woman prepared a feast for Saul and his servants that night. She killed the fatted calf and baked unleavened bread which they ate, before rising up and going out into the night (28:24, 25). We cannot but notice some similarities with the Last Supper that Jesus ate with his disciples. This would be Saul’s last meal before he died. That they arose and went out that night reminds us of Judas, who has much in common with Saul. Judas was at the Last Supper, but after eating the piece of bread, ‘Satan entered him’ and he went out immediately, ‘and it was night’ (John 13:27, 30). Judas would betray Jesus, before hanging himself. Saul would die after falling on his own sword. Shameful ends for two men who though called by the Lord refused to humble themselves before the Lord God or his Son Jesus Christ. ‘Many are called but few are chosen’ said Jesus (Mat 20:16). It is by grace alone, through faith alone, that we are saved.

**Dilemma averted and plunder recovered** Text: 1Samuel 29, 30

King Saul turned his back on the Lord when he refused to utterly destroy the Amalekites, and even before this. He turned his sights on David to kill him because this faithful young servant was praised for killing Goliath. The downward spiritual spiral of Saul culminated in him seeking guidance from a necromancer, because the Lord did not answer him (28:6). The guidance he got through this forbidden means was most shocking; he would be dead within 24hours.

The death of Saul would pave the way for David to become king. He would be relieved from years of escaping Saul’s spear; not that he would rejoice in Saul’s death- far from it! But was David ready to become king of Israel? Where was he at this time? You will recall that he had gone to live among the Philistines, in the town of Ziklag. Moreover, at this very point in time David was marching with his men as a unit of the Philistine army to attack Saul and the army of Israel. He had deceived the king of Gath into thinking he was his loyal servant and ready to fight with the Philistines- despite his history of slaughtering Philistines!

There was David with his militia at the rear of the vast Philistine army. If he fought against Israel it is hard to imagine them welcoming him as their king. If he turned upon the Philistines it is hard to imagine him becoming anyone’s king! In chapter 29 we see David’s dilemma being averted. For chapter 30 we have two subheadings: ‘Destruction of Ziklag’ and, ‘Defeat of Amalekites and recovery of all taken’.

**1. David’s dilemma averted**

In fear of Saul, David fled Israel to live among the Philistines. He endeared himself to the king of Gath through flattery and deception, so much so that this king told David he was to join his army in battle against none other than the Israelites. If David realised the dilemma into which he had fallen as a result of moving to live among the Philistines he shows no evidence of such - apart from being ambiguous in his answer to Achish, king of Gath, in 28:2. Here in chapter 29 the spotlight returns to David and his men assembling at the rear of the Philistine army. This chapter takes us back in time because this assembly takes place at Aphek, which is quite a distance from Shumen (29:1, cf.28:4) - although the Israelites were already up in Jezreel.

We noted previously that David did not consult the Lord before moving to Gath; there is no mention of the Lord at all in chapter 27, or in chapter 28 for that matter, apart from Saul inquiring of the Lord; and then swearing an oath in his name. As David and his men gather with the Philistine army there is still no mention of the Lord. In fact, David says nothing by way of prayer to extricate himself from his predicament. Even when told he had to go back he protested to Achish- rather too loudly we fear! Though absent in name, the Lord is not absent in his providential working to deliver David from his dilemma. The Lord who rules over the all nations is able to work through the kings of these nations, using them as his servants to do his will.

There were five Philistine kings who came together to fight their enemies, primarily Israel. On this occasion they planned to attack Israel from the north, cutting off the northern tribes, and also the highway that went through the valley of Jezreel. This was a long way from Gath and the other Philistine cities but the Philistines preferred fighting on the plain rather than in the hills. As the Philistine lords or kings reviewed their troops they noticed a bunch of Hebrews at the rear with Achish (29:2). So they questioned Achish as to what was going on. Achish, whom we have seen was not the smartest kid in the class, boasted to his fellow kings that he had David, the servant of King Saul, join his army (29:3). David had been endearing himself to Achish for over a year, and Achish trusted him completely.

The other four Philistine lords were not as gullible as Achish regarding David. They got angry with him and told him he had to send David and his men back. They were not prepared to have this Hebrew join in their battle against the Hebrews. They saw what Achish did not see, namely that this fellow would probably turn against them in the heat of battle in order to get back into the good books of his master, King Saul. This Hebrew fellow was none other than David, known to everyone including the Philistines for his bravery and ability in killing Goliath. The women’s victory song reverberated in Philistine ears, as well as the ears of Saul (29:5).

Achish had no choice but to reluctantly send David home. He called David and continued to praise him, even swearing on the name of the Lord that David was an upright man in whom he found no evil (29:6). David was upright and loyal, but not to Achish! He was loyal to the Lord’s anointed king, and above all to loyal to the Lord whom he knew, even though Achish was using the Lord’s name more than David at this time. David was to ‘go in peace’ because the other Philistine kings overruled Achish.

David had just been saved from a situation that could only end in disaster for him, and for Israel. Yet he continues what can only be a façade, protesting his innocence and his loyalty to Achish. He has gullible Achish comparing him to ‘an angel of God’ (29:9), but thankfully obeying the order of the other kings to send David back. And so as the Philistines moved on to Jezreel, David and his men rose early to return to the land of the Philistines, to the town of Ziklag that Achish had given to David. And so we, as readers of this account of David’s folly, breathe a sigh of relief and sing a song of praise to the Lord for his divine intervention and providence towards David, and ultimately towards us!

**2. Destruction of Ziklag**

By the grace of God, David’s dilemma was averted. Saul’s dilemma which led him to consult the witch of En Dor will have a tragic ending in the next chapter. So what is the significance of chapter 30? It follows on from chapter 29, but why are we told this story about the destruction of Ziklag? With the Philistines going to war against Israel, all the towns in the south were left unprotected. So the Amalekites, a tribe a desert raiders, took the opportunity to do some raiding. Saul had failed to utterly destroy this tribe and was judged by the Lord for his disobedience. So when David and his men were up at Aphek, the Amalekites burned Ziklag and carried off the women and children (30:1, 2). They would keep them as slaves or sell them as slaves.

David took three days to get back to Ziklag and discover this picture of devastation. He and all his men were devastated; they wept long and loud (30:4). Distress at losing his own family was exacerbated when the people spoke of stoning David. This death threat while grieving his loved ones was more than David could bear. ‘But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God’ (30:6). For over a year David had been living by his own wit and wisdom. We have heard no mention of the Lord since he fled to Gath and Ziklag. But David was just a man and he felt the weakness of the flesh at this time. We can picture him on his knees before the Lord crying for mercy and for help in this disastrous situation. In contrast to Saul seeking strength through a medium, David sought strength in the Lord. Where do you seek help when you are in a very dark place like David? Do you say with him: ‘I lift my eyes to the hills? Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth’ (Ps 121:1, 2)?

In this chapter, with this disaster at Ziklag, we see David again calling for the priest and the ephod (30:7). By this divinely ordained means David inquired of the Lord; ‘Shall I pursue this troop? Shall I overtake them?’ (30:8). The Lord answered ‘Yes’, and promised David he would recover all. With six hundred exhausted and grieving men, David set of at once in pursuit of whoever had raided his town of Ziklag. At the Brook Besor, some two hundred were too exhausted to go on so they stayed there while David went on with four hundred men.

In the providence of God, they came across an Egyptian boy who was discarded by his Amalekite master because he was sick. He was close to death after three days without food or water. David gave him bread and water, and some high energy raisins and figs, and he revived (30:11, 12). This boy told David that it was the Amalekites who raided and burned Ziklag, along with other towns in southern Judah. After getting David to promise him immunity, this boy agreed to lead David and his men to the camp of the Amalekites. And so David caught up with the Amalekites, as the Lord had promised.

David found the Amalekites spread out in the valley, eating and drinking and dancing, celebrating their success in raiding Ziklag and other towns. Unlike David who killed all the people in his raids, the Amalekites did not kill anyone; did David feel a twinge of guilt at his conduct and deception? He must certainly have felt a sense of God’s mercy to have found his family all alive!

David attacked the Amalekite camp from twilight until the evening of the next day. They were probably so drunk and hungover they could not fight back, although four hundred escaped into the desert on camels (30:17). And so, according to the promise of the Lord, and his grace and goodness, David recovered all. Not one of the women and children was harmed, and all the livestock and goods taken by the Amalekites were recovered. David gathered all the people and their property and set off for home, driving the livestock ahead of them. It was a time of great relief and joy as they headed for home with ‘David’s spoil’ (30:20).

**3. Division of the plunder**

If there were any rules in war it was that, ‘finders keepers’; war by definition means no rules or human rights, especially when wicked and worthless men are involved. David’s militia, as you will recall, comprised all manner of men, some of whom were quite wicked (22:2, 30:22). With great skill he managed to keep them together, but as the four hundred returned with ‘David’s spoil’, David needed all of his people management skills to make them share the spoil with the two hundred who stayed at Brook Besor.

David reminded his ‘brothers’ that what they had was in fact the gift of the Lord (30:23). It was because of God’s goodness that they recovered their families and property, so the property, as well as the families, must be returned to the rightful owners. David was not yet king but was already acting like their king in making a rule that those who go into battle and those who stay with the supplies shall share in the spoils of war (30:24, 25).

This principal of sharing continues into the NT church, and into the church today. Everything we possess is because of God’s goodness, and we should reflect his goodness in sharing our bounty with others. Let us remember that, ‘Every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights’ (James 1:17), and not be hanging on to things as if we earned them and have the right to keep them. How wonderful our society would be if this teaching expounded by David, and by the apostle Paul, was practiced!

David went even further and shared the plunder the Amalekites had taken with other towns in Judah. Was he simply being politically astute? I think he was acting according to this same theological principal, returning things and seeking to bless others from the blessing the Lord had given him (30:26-31). ‘As we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith’ (Gal 6:10).

**Saul’s suicide**  Text: 1Samuel 31

Down in Egypt, the Lord God formed the people of Israel into a nation. He called them his covenant people, a unique nation with God himself as their sovereign. He made Moses and Joshua leaders and then raised up others to judge the nation after he settled them in Canaan. The Lord also established a priesthood to lead the people in worshipping him. But when Samuel was born the priesthood had become corrupt. The Lord declared through this young prophet Samuel: ‘For those who honour me I will honour, and those who despise me will be disdained’ (2:30 NIV). With these words of judgment, the Lord killed the wicked sons of the priest and Eli himself.

When Samuel grew old the people of Israel demanded a king like other nations; they were rejecting the Lord’s reign over them (8:7). The Lord graciously gave them a king, after warning them of how ‘a king like other nations’ would rule over them; he would take their sons for his army, their daughters for his kitchens, the best of their harvest and also take their land for himself. God chose Saul and put his Spirit upon him so that he led the Israelites in defeating the Ammonites; the Ammonites were threatening to put out the right eye of everyone living in Jabesh Gilead and so bring disgrace on all Israel (11:2).

But Saul did not continue in obedience to the Lord, and he did not repent when Samuel confronted him about his sin. He did not honour the Lord, so the Lord had David anointed king. In the second half of this book of 1Samuel we read of Saul’s jealous hatred towards David and the Lord’s protection and preservation of David, who refused to harm the Lord’s anointed. Saul’s life was ruled by fear of David, as well as fear of the Philistines, rather than fear of the Lord. He turned his back on the Lord until the Lord no longer answered his prayer and he turned to a medium for help (chapter 28).

In the Book of 1Chronicles, Saul’s life is summed in these words: ‘So Saul died for his unfaithfulness which he had committed against the Lord, because he did not keep the word of the Lord, and also because he consulted a medium for guidance. But he did not inquire of the Lord; therefore He killed him, and turned the kingdom over to David, son of Jesse’ (1Chron 10:13, 14). Let us briefly look at the tragic end of King Saul as recorded in the closing chapter of 1Samuel. We note four steps in his demise: Saul’s sons killed, Saul falls on his sword, Saul’s body mutilated, Saul’s body burned and buried.

**1. Saul’s sons killed in battle**

David was sent back to Ziklag by the Philistine rulers as they marched north to attack Israel. David was distressed to discover Ziklag had been raided and all the women and children carried off. But he inquired of the Lord and was successful in recovering everyone alive. To the north the story as different. After returning from consulting the witch of En Dor, Saul and his men were attacked by the Philistines. They were forced to flee, and many Israelites fell slain on Mt Gilboa (31:1).

With the Philistines in hot pursuit, three of Saul’s sons were killed, including Jonathan, David’s loyal and loving ‘brother’ (31:2). David mourned for Jonathan deeply after hearing of his death (2Sam 1:25, 26). Another son called Ishbosheth survived and was king over Israel for a short time (2Sam 2:10).

**2. Saul falls on his own sword**

Saul himself was critically wounded as he fled from the Philistines. Fearing they would find him and torture him, Saul asked his armour-bearer to finish him off (31:4). But this young man refused to obey Saul’s order. He showed that he feared the Lord more than man, even the king; he probably feared harming the Lord’s anointed. David, Saul’s original armour-bearer, would have similarly refused to kill the king. So Saul took his own sword and fell on it (31:4). A tragic end to the tragic reign of the first king of Israel.

While falling on one’s sword might be considered heroic by heathens, it tragic and shameful for a man of God. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Fear of the Lord means trusting in his almighty power to deliver, even to the very end. Through his sin, Saul cut himself off from the Lord. He felt abandoned and he was abandoned by the Lord. He was left to his own human devices; indeed to the power of Satan which is death. In the end even his own armour-bearer refused him an honourable death, leaving him to take his own life.

Ultimately it was the Lord who killed Saul because he refused to obey the word of the Lord, as we just read from 1Chronicles. Saul stands, or rather falls, as a solemn reminder to us of the consequences of refusing to listen to the words of the Lord. ‘The soul that sins shall die’ (Ezek 18:4). ‘The wages of sin is death’ (Rom 6:23). These are the words of Holy Scripture so take them seriously. We have all sinned and are destined to die and perish unless we listen to the gospel of Jesus Christ. You know the second half of Romans 6:23: ‘But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord’.

What must I do to be saved? I must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31). I must humble myself before the Lord and he will lift me up. Saul, like many before him and many after him, refused to humble himself before the Lord, and see where his pride landed him. Kings and leaders are susceptible to pride, but so is every human being. Let not pride, and refusal to listen to the call of Jesus to repent, bring you to a tragic end like Saul.

**3. Saul’s body mutilated**

Seeing Saul and his sons fallen on the battle field, the Israelites from across the valley and across the Jordan fled their cities and the Philistines came to settle in them. The nation of Israel had fallen into the hands of the enemy and was left without a king. The Philistines attributed their victory to their gods. As they stripped the fallen soldiers of Israel the next day they came across the bodies of Saul and his three sons. They cut off Saul’s head, just as David had done with Goliath, marking the certainty of death and also a trophy of victory. They put Saul’s head in the temple of Dagon (1Chron 10:10), and sent word throughout the land of the Philistines. They put his armour in the temple of their goddess (31:10).

These uncircumcised heathen were praising their gods for their victory over Israel and over Yahweh, the God of Israel. Saul’s tragic life and shameful death brought shame to the name of the God of Israel. Whenever church leaders, or any Christian, is brought to shame before the ungodly they bring shame to the name of our Lord. In various psalms David cries to the Lord that he will not be brought to shame by his enemies because he knew that, as a man of God, this would bring shame upon the name of the Lord: ‘O my God, I trust in you; let me not be ashamed’ (Ps 25:2).

The Philistines continued their humiliation of Saul and the Israelites, and their God, by taking the headless body of Saul and the bodies of his three sons, and fastening them to the wall at Beth Shan (31:10). Public hanging and mutilation of bodies still occurs under brutal and wicked regimes. Such wickedness is of course, seen supremely in the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Jews cried for Jesus to be crucified, a most painful and humiliating means of execution devised by pagans; although they did call for the bodies to be taken down before the Sabbath! As the author and finisher of our faith, Jesus, ‘endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of God’ (Heb 12:2). The cross is a symbol of shame, but for us who know that Jesus was bearing our sin we see the cross and the resurrection as victory, victory over sin and death.

**4. Saul’s body burned and buried**

Seeing the bodies of Saul and his sons shamefully hung on the wall at Beth Shan, subject to vultures and decay, was too much for the people of Jabesh Gilead. Jabesh Gilead was a town about 20km away, across the Jordan. Saul had come to the rescue of this town when he first became king. It seems they never forgot how he saved them from having their right eyes poked out by the Ammonites.

So valiant men from Jabesh Gilead travelled all night take down the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall at Beth Shan (31:12). They brought the bodies back to Jabesh Gilead and burned them. It was not the practice in Israel to burn or cremate the dead. Was it that these bodies were so badly mutilated that they burned them, or was it to prevent further mutilation? We cannot be sure. But after cremation they buried the bones of Saul and his sons under a tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days (31:13). In the grace of God, Saul and his sons were given a decent burial and were mourned by a faithful remnant in Israel.

David was unaware of Saul’s death and what was happening to his body until a messenger brought news to him at Ziklag- as we learn in 2Samuel. Years later David retrieved the bones of Saul and Jonathan from Jabesh and buried them in the land of Benjamin, in the tomb of his father Kish (2Sam 21:12). David himself mourned the death of Saul despite the years he spent escaping Saul’s sword. Many years into David’s reign as king he was still setting things right in the land after Saul’s bloodthirsty reign. The repatriation of Saul’s bones was part of this setting things right: ‘And after that God heeded the prayer of the land’ (2Sam 21:14).

It is important to set things right according to God’s word and not cover up sin if we are to be restored as individuals, as a church, or as a nation. We hear calls for past sins to be exposed and acknowledged, with demands for an official ‘sorry’, but true forgiveness and reconciliation is only found in the Lord Jesus Christ. May the Lord be pleased to heal our lives as we repent of our sin and receive his forgiveness? May he be pleased to heal our church as we repent our sin, and receive the Lord’s forgiveness. And may the Lord be pleased to heal our broken and hurting land; may he be pleased to bring revival by his Spirit and by faithful preaching of the gospel of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ. Through David the Lord brought healing and unity to the land of Israel, but only David’s greater Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, will bring healing and unity to us today. Peace with God is a precursor to peace among men.

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