

TODAY IN THE **WORD**[™]

A ministry of Moody Bible Institute

LISTENING FOR GOD'S CALL

A STUDY IN 1 SAMUEL

SEPTEMBER 2020

Slowing Down to Listen

From the President of Moody Bible Institute

"Finding a quiet place in your life to listen for God's voice is essential to your spiritual life."



I don't know about you, but the onset of COVID-19 reminded me of the time when your home suddenly

loses electricity. As the lights go out, everything comes to a halt, every sound is silenced. Certainly, the pandemic altered the ordinary rhythm of our lives. But with this loss came opportunity to reorder our busy schedules. It is easy to let people and events, no matter how valuable, crowd out our time alone with God. But without refueling time, we risk burning out. Finding a quiet place in your life to listen for God's voice is essential to your spiritual life.

You may be familiar with the story of Samuel. Samuel's mother, Hannah, dedicated her son to God, so he grew up spending every day and every night in the Tabernacle serving alongside Israel's prophet Eli. One thing Samuel probably never expected was to hear God's voice calling in the middle of the night. I'm sure it must have been quiet in that holy place. Suddenly, the boy was awakened by someone calling his name. Assuming it was Eli,

Samuel ran to the older man's side. But the prophet said it was not him. Three times this repeated, and Eli told Samuel, "I did not call; go back and lie down" (1 Sam. 3:5).

Finally, Eli realized it was God Himself (v. 8). Eli told the boy, "If he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" What an amazing moment that must have been! "In those days the word of the Lord was rare" (v. 1). Yet, God continues to speak to us today through the pages of His Word as the Holy Spirit presses truth on our hearts. And God speaks to us when we come to Him in prayer, settling our mind to focus on Him. Psalm 37:7 urges us to "be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him."

How can we carve out space in our lives to be still before God? Maybe we can use the time we spend in the car, washing dishes, or cutting the lawn. We can talk to Him in those first moments before we get out of bed, turning to God instead of turning on our smartphone. Eli taught Samuel to respond to God in humble obedience, to be watchful and ready, "on-call" for what God had to say. We, too, need to make space in our lives to listen for God's voice, ready to respond with teachable and obedient hearts. ■

Life After Death

by Dr. John Koessler

“Theologians sometimes refer to the human condition between death and resurrection as the intermediate state.”

One of the most intriguing accounts in 1 Samuel is when Saul visits the medium of Endor (1 Sam. 28:1–25). Samuel’s appearance gives us some insight into what we will experience after we die. Although some commentators interpret Samuel’s appearance as a satanic apparition, the woman actually saw Samuel, and Saul spoke with him. The Bible mentions a few instances where the dead were raised to life, but Samuel was an unresurrected spirit. Samuel’s appearance was unexpected, even by the medium herself, as is evident from her alarm (v. 12). This seems to be a singular event and not the norm.

What is also unusual was Samuel’s appearance. Even as a spirit, he had a recognizable human form. The NIV Bible says Samuel appeared to the woman as a “ghostly figure,” and the Hebrew word used in verse 13 is one used to refer to gods and angels. Samuel’s appearance seems to have been glorious like an angel. In this state, Samuel retained his identity and could recall what he had predicted about Saul’s demise. He asked, “Why

have you disturbed me by bringing me up?” (v. 14). His question implies that Samuel had been in a state of rest or peace. He didn’t want to return. Also, while Samuel retained the memory of things he had said and done, he was untroubled by them.

Theologians sometimes refer to the human condition between death and the general resurrection (1 Cor. 15:51–53) as the *intermediate state*. Everyone who dies will have this experience. Jesus affirmed that one’s identity and consciousness continue after death when He promised the thief on the cross, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). However, the Bible does not say that everyone who dies will experience peace. In Luke 16:23 Jesus spoke of Hell or Hades as a place of torment for those who die in their sin. For all who have trusted in Jesus Christ “to be away from the body” is to be “at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). But those who die without receiving Christ’s gift of forgiveness by faith will experience the torment of God’s wrath. ■

For Further Study

To learn more, read *One Minute After You Die* by Erwin Lutzer (Moody Publishers).

We hope these questions will help you consider (or discuss with others) what God is teaching you through this month's study of His Word. We've left a bit of room to write down your thoughts as well!

WEEK 1: Why do we find it hard to listen to God?

WEEK 2: How does God speak to us today?

WEEK 3: What made David a person after God's heart? Would you describe yourself this way? Why or why not?

WEEK 4: One of the themes of this book is the difference between Saul and David. What major differences do you see between the two men?

Want more questions? Check out the Go Deeper section on our website or app!

TODAY IN THE WORD™

The Book of 1 Samuel: Listening for God's Call

Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."—1 Samuel 3:10

When God calls, are you listening? As we study the book of 1 Samuel with *Today in the Word*, we'll see how God speaks to His people. We'll encounter famous biblical characters including the faithful prophet Samuel, the disgraced king Saul, and David, "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14). This book contains some well known stories you may have learned as a child: the defeat of the Philistine giant Goliath by a humble young shepherd (chapter 17), the friendship between David and Jonathan (chapter 18), and others. But this month, we'll look at these familiar characters and the events in their lives through the prism of God's call.

We'll compare the importance of speaking and being silent before God. We'll consider the blessings of holiness and the devastation of sin in relation to people and their leaders. We pray this study will encourage you and show you:

- How to listen to God's word to you personally
- How to trust God in difficult circumstances
- How to apply the example of David's faith to your life

Thank you for being a part of this growing family of *Today in the Word* readers! We are grateful for your prayers and financial support. May you hear God's voice and may He fill each day of your life with His presence. ■

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The God Who Hears

Read 1 Samuel 1:1–2:11

*There is no one holy like the LORD;
There is no one besides you.—1 Samuel 2:2*

Do you believe God listens to your prayers? Do you listen for God's voice? As a young boy, the prophet Samuel heard God calling to him in the middle of the night. This dramatic moment prompted our theme for this month's study of the book of 1 Samuel: *Listening for God's Call*. Although named for the prophet Samuel, this book focuses on David, Israel's most famous king. For both men, listening to God's voice would play an important part of directing their path.

Samuel's mother, Hannah, was one of two wives to Elkanah, an Ephraimite priest from the hill country of Ephraim. Hannah was probably Elkanah's first wife. Elkanah may have taken Peninnah as a second wife, an accepted practice in those days, to ensure that he would produce an heir. Peninnah's ability to have children, combined with Elkanah's obvious preference for Hannah, resulted in a painful rivalry between the two women. Hannah was subjected to daily torment, not only because of

her situation but also because of Peninnah's cruel words. Elkanah's blundering attempt to offer comfort did not make Hannah feel any better because it was the Lord who had closed her womb (v. 6). Even Eli, the old priest who sat outside the tabernacle in Shiloh, added insult to injury when he mistook Hannah's agonized prayer for drunken mumbling (v. 14). When Hannah explained her actions, Eli's harsh criticism changed to blessing.

The only one who had nothing to say in this narrative was God. He was not talking; He was listening (vv. 19–20). Hannah acknowledged this in the name she gave to her son, which may be understood as a pun on a Hebrew phrase meaning "asked of God."

► In this account, Hannah speaks to God more than anyone else. He is a God who speaks to His servants. But the first glimpse we have of Him in this book is of the God who hears. Be assured that God hears your prayers, and He is listening.

Pray with Us

As we begin this month's devotional journey through the book of 1 Samuel, our prayer is that God will encourage you. We pray this study will show you that our God not only speaks but also listens attentively to our prayers.

Two Kinds of Service

Read 1 Samuel 2:12–36

And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the LORD and with people.—1 Samuel 2:26

In recent days it seems as if news headlines are filled with stories about church leaders whose behavior has shocked believers and unbelievers alike. Unfortunately, these kinds of failures are not new. Today's text contrasts the scandal caused by Eli's sons with the simple obedience of Samuel, who "was ministering before the LORD—a boy wearing a linen ephod" (v. 18). Eli, a priest, was aware of what his sons were doing, treating each sacrifice as if it were their personal possession, and sleeping with the women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting (vv. 12–16, 22).

Eli confronted his sons, but it was too little too late. The rebuke of the unnamed prophet in verse 27 suggests that Eli was complicit in their behavior. Eli did not confront them until he was "very old" (v. 22). He also seems to have profited from their sins (v. 29). Today we might call this sort of complicity "enabling." God's decision

to send Eli a prophet in an age when "the word of the Lord was rare" further highlighted the gravity of their sin (1 Sam. 3:1).

The chilling statement of verse 25 that Eli's sons refused to listen to their father's rebuke because "it was the Lord's will to put them to death" is a solemn reminder of how seriously God takes sin. We are much more nonchalant about it. We often miss the point of the Bible's assertion that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). We mistake this diagnosis as permission, instead of allowing it to show us our need for a righteousness that can come only through faith in Christ.

▶ Luke 2:52 is very similar to today's key verse, 1 Samuel 2:26. It says that Jesus also "grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." Jesus is more than just an example of admirable behavior; He is the solution to our sin. Trust Him today.

Pray with Us

As you read today's passage from 1 Samuel 2, pray that the Lord will show you how seriously He takes sin. Praise Him that the righteousness of Christ is available to us as a solution to our sin!

The God Who Speaks

Read 1 Samuel 3:1–21

Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”—1 Samuel 3:10

When one-year-old Ayla Esler was able to hear for the very first time, she burst into a big smile, putting her hand to her ear and wiggling with glee. She was born deaf, but a device called a cochlear implant, which stimulates the auditory nerve directly, enabled her to hear.

First Samuel 3:1–21 describes what it was like for Samuel to hear God speak to him for the first time. This was not because Samuel was deaf, but because “the word of the Lord was rare” (v. 1). The call came while Samuel was “lying down in the house of the Lord,” probably referring to a larger structure that housed the tabernacle (v. 3). God’s voice was so unexpected that Samuel at first mistook it for Eli, the elderly priest with whom he served. It took three attempts and some coaching from Eli before Samuel understood what was happening. When verse 7 says that Samuel did not yet “know” the Lord, it does not

mean that he was an unbeliever, only that he did not recognize God’s voice speaking to him.

The message which inaugurated Samuel’s prophetic ministry was a fearful warning of impending judgment on Eli’s household. The boy prophet was initially reluctant to deliver it until Eli urged him with these strong words: “May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you” (v. 17). Samuel learned that those who receive God’s words must be faithful in sharing them, even when they are hard to say. Those to whom God has made known His word must always speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).

► God still speaks to us today through His written Word. Why not make Samuel’s prayer your own? The next time you open the Bible, begin your study of God’s Word by saying, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Pray with Us

The Lord who speaks to His people is the focus of today’s Scripture passage. During your prayer time, repeat Samuel’s words, “Speak, Lord,” and be ready to listen.

Using God

Read 1 Samuel 4:1–22

Come near to God and he will come near to you.—James 4:8

Humans can sometimes fool themselves in believing that they can control God. Israel knew better. In his book *The Divine Commodity*, author Skye Jethani observes, “Rather than a religion of superstition or divination, attempting to control and manipulate God, the Hebrew Scriptures called them to ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.’”

Israel’s attempt to defeat the Philistines by carrying the ark of the covenant into battle was not an act of faith. It was a desperate attempt to force God to do what they wanted (v. 4). Their behavior was more pagan than believing. For one thing, it showed that they misunderstood the nature of the ark. The ark symbolized God’s presence but it was not a container for God. By carrying the ark into battle, Israel treated the ark like a talisman or even worse like an idol (v. 7). Their behavior also showed a callous disregard for God’s will. The elders asked the right question

in verse 3, but their actions proved that they were not interested in the answer. They only wanted God to do what they had decided in advance that He should do. The results were devastating: “The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. The ark of God was captured, and Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died” (vv. 10–11).

In His message to Samuel, the Lord had already revealed the answer to the elders’ question. Why had defeat come to Israel at the hands of the Philistines? Because the Lord had determined “to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle” (1 Sam. 3:11).

► Jesus warned His disciples not to pray like the pagans who “think they will be heard because of their many words” (Matt. 6:7). You can’t manipulate God. Ask what you want, but trust the Father’s answer (Matt. 6:8).

Pray with Us

Are you willing to trust the Father’s answer to your prayer? Ask Him to increase your faith, grow your desire for the truth of His Word, and make you a more devoted prayer warrior.

God Among the Idols

Read 1 Samuel 5:1–12

*For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;
he is to be feared above all gods.—Psalm 96:4*

“My dad is stronger than your dad,” said a little boy to his friend. This childish competition mirrors the way people in the ancient world thought about their gods. The Philistines placed the captured ark inside the temple of Dagon as a spoil of war, the way a conquering ruler might keep a defeated king as a slave. But the next day the people of Ashdod awoke to find their idol fallen on his face in a posture of worship before the ark.

The people of Ashdod returned the idol to its place but the same thing happened the next day. Only this time Dagon’s head and hands were broken off, a fate often suffered by prisoners taken in battle in the ancient Near East (v. 4). The Philistines would have viewed this as especially humiliating for their warrior god. Also, the Lord afflicted the people in that region with a plague, similar to what the Egyptians faced during the Exodus.

After consulting with the people of Ashdod, the Philistine rulers

decided to relocate the ark to Gath, another of Philistia’s great cities. The move had devastating consequences. When the people of Gath suffered the same fate as the residents of Ashdod, the Philistine rulers sent the ark to Ekron but with no better results. By the time the ark entered the city, God’s hand was already “very heavy on it,” and the residents were in a state of panic: “let it go back to its own place, or it will kill us and our people” (v. 11). What should have been a victory lap for the Philistine army, turned into a counterattack by the God of Israel that revealed the impotence of their idols.

► While you may not worship at a carved statue, we slip into idolatry when we offer the devotion which belongs to God alone to “created things rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25). Reserve that devotion for God alone.

Pray with Us

Today’s Scripture reading is a somber reminder of the dangers of following false gods. Pray that nothing will distract you from your devotion to the one true God, that nothing will take the place of your Creator.

Holy Is the Lord

Read 1 Samuel 6:1–21

Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God?—1 Samuel 6:20

Every child has experienced that uncomfortable moment when they realize they have crossed the line with a parent. The first clue may be their dad’s stern tone of voice or that pinched look their mom gets. The result is usually a feeling of fear that combines the child’s awareness of transgression with a recognition that they deserve punishment.

After suffering judgments by the hand of God for seven months, the Philistine rulers debated how to rid themselves of the ark. Afraid of making matters worse, they sought the advice of their priests and soothsayers. The religious leaders advised the Philistines to send the ark out with a guilt offering consisting of gold images that represented the plagues the Lord had sent (vv. 4–5). They also chided the Philistines for their reluctance, pointing to Pharaoh’s experience during the Exodus as a warning (v. 6).

The conditions described in verses 7–9 served two purposes. They

attempted to solve their problem by combining magic with paganized devotion. And it was also a test to prove the source of the plagues. The new cart and cows that were previously untouched by the yoke speak of a kind of recognition of purity. However, the golden images showed animals that were considered unclean by the Mosaic law (Lev. 11:29).

When the people of Beth Shemesh, a town in Judah near the Philistine border, saw the ark returning of its own accord, they rejoiced. But their joy was short-lived when several were struck down after peeking inside the ark (vv. 19–20).

▶ Those who fear the Lord value what God values. They let Him draw the boundaries that shape their behavior. As 2 Corinthians 7:1 urges, we should “purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.”

Pray with Us

Today, we thank God for His holiness. Praise Him that He changes us into the image of Christ, making us holy as He is holy. May we submit to His will, allowing Him to shape our behavior and purify us.

Return to the Lord

Read 1 Samuel 7:1–17

Thus far the LORD has helped us. — 1 Samuel 7:12

The hymn “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” written by Robert Robinson, celebrates God’s protection and grace. But did you ever wonder about this puzzling phrase: “Here I raise my Ebenezer. . . .”? The line refers to the name of a monument made of stones that was set up by Samuel after the Lord defeated Philistines. Samuel wanted to remember what the Lord had done on their behalf. The name, *Ebenezer*, meant “stone of help.”

The events in today’s text took place twenty years after the ark returned to Israel. The decades that followed the ark’s relocation to Kiriath Jearim were marked by spiritual revival. Israel “turned back to the Lord” by destroying images of the Canaanite fertility goddess Ashtoreth and her male counterpart Baal (vv. 2–4).

God’s people sealed this commitment with a solemn assembly where they confessed their sin and poured water out before the Lord. This was a symbolic gesture of devotion. They may also have denied

themselves water for a time to show their sincerity.

During this ceremony, the Philistines attacked, viewing the gathering as either an opportunity or a threat. The terrified Israelites asked Samuel to intercede with God, and he did so by sacrificing a lamb as a “whole burnt offering” (v. 9). The Philistines chose this moment to attack, perhaps thinking that Israelites would be most vulnerable worshipping. Notice that God’s answer to Samuel’s prayer was immediate. As the enemy attacked, God responded with “loud thunder” that sent the Philistines into a panicked retreat (v. 10). Samuel commemorated the victory by setting up a stone to remind them that God was the source of their victory.

► Do you have a reminder of what God has done for you? It does not have to be elaborate. Think of a way you can pay tribute to God’s work in your life. It can be as simple as a verse from Scripture posted where you can see it.

Pray with Us

Prayerfully consider the lessons in today’s dramatic account of the Israelites’ victory over the Philistines. God is always in control and His will always prevails! Thank Him for His victories in your life.

The Quest for a King

Read 1 Samuel 8:1–22

The LORD is King for ever and ever.—Psalm 10:16

A *vote of confidence* is sometimes taken to indicate whether or not leaders continue to have support from those they serve. The term may be misleading. In most cases, such a vote occurs only when a significant number of people have expressed a lack of confidence in their leader.

As Samuel aged, the elders of Israel grew worried about the future. Samuel's sons did not share their father's faith or his values. The elders worried about the direction his sons' leadership would take after Samuel was gone. Their solution was to demand that Samuel appoint a king, "such as all the other nations have" (v. 5).

Samuel's displeasure over this turn of events may seem puzzling. It looks like these tribal leaders were only acting responsibly. Yet verse 7 reveals a more disturbing motive. The problems were real but their solution betrayed a lack of confidence in God. They were motivated by an unhealthy desire to follow the pattern of "all the

other nations" (v. 5). God's purpose lay in a different direction. He had called Israel to be "set apart" from the nations (Lev. 20:26). For Israel, the Lord alone was to be their ruler and provider.

Even more sobering was the Lord's decision to grant Israel's request (v. 9). This was not like informed consent when the doctor proposes a treatment with risks and advises the patient of the possible consequences. God's response was a mixture of prophecy and warning. Israel had demanded a king like all the other nations and that is exactly what they would get. Israel's first king would prove to be a disaster, as would many who would follow in his wake.

► Are you frustrated because God has not granted you an important request? It may only be a matter of timing. Or it could be a demonstration of His goodness. We are not always the best judges of what we need. Only God knows that!

Pray with Us

What have you learned from the life of Samuel so far? Pray that you'll trust the Lord's judgment even in times of failure and discouragement, even when He seems to be silent, when your requests are not granted.

Divine Coincidence

Read 1 Samuel 9:1–27

*In their hearts humans plan their course,
but the LORD establishes their steps.—Proverbs 16:9*

G. K. Chesterton once observed, “Coincidences are spiritual puns.” In other words, what we view as coincidence may be God’s intervention in our life. Today’s passage describes a series of coincidences in Saul’s life that turned out to be divine appointments. We also get a glimpse into this future king’s character.

Saul’s appearance was striking. He was tall and “as handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel” (v. 2). He was also a son of privilege. Saul’s father was “a man of standing” (v. 1). After an unfruitful three-day search for his father’s lost donkeys, Saul suggested that they call it off. Saul’s decision began a series of divine coincidences that led to an encounter with God’s prophet. Saul just happened to decide to end the search near the town where Samuel lives. They arrived on a day and at the time when Samuel was about to officiate an important sacrifice. They ran into a group of women who could

tell them where to find the prophet. There were too many coincidences for it to be anything but a divine appointment.

Indeed, verse 15 indicates that none of this was accidental. God had orchestrated the whole thing to move His plan forward. But there were also storm clouds on the horizon. The fact that Saul did not know anything about Samuel, combined with his reluctance and passivity, was a foreshadowing of the kind of king he would eventually become. On the surface, Saul looked like the perfect choice for a king. He had a strong pedigree. What they could not know was that Saul was deficient in faith.

► What may appear to be a happy coincidence in your life, could actually be God’s divine intervention. This is another reason to place our full confidence in God: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight” (Prov. 3:5–6).

Pray with Us

What we may view as coincidences is in reality God’s work in our lives. Ask God to show you how He is working in your life, even in small events, and thank Him for His guiding hand over your destiny.

Confirming God's Call

Read 1 Samuel 10:1–27

Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.—Galatians 5:25

The coronation of Queen Elizabeth II of England took place on June 2, 1953, in Westminster Abbey. The queen arrived in a gold coach pulled by eight horses. Over eight thousand guests witnessed the public ceremony.

Saul's coronation was much different. Samuel declared Saul to be Israel's leader (literally "prince") by anointing him with oil on the outskirts of town. The ceremony was private, not even Saul's servant attended (1 Sam. 9:27).

A series of three signs followed that confirmed God's call. Each was a demonstration of the power of God's Spirit. In the third, Saul joined a procession of prophets and spoke while temporarily under the influence of the Holy Spirit (1 Sam. 10:9–11). Those who saw were so startled that they turned the event into a proverb.

This demonstration of the power of God's Spirit to change Saul into "a different person" (v. 6) offered a glimpse into the kind of king Saul might have been if he had responded

in faith. On the other hand, Samuel's stipulation that Saul should wait for him at Gilgal foreshadowed the catastrophic failure that was yet to come (see 1 Sam. 13:8–14). Saul was no automaton. While the power came from God, the response would be Saul's. God's Spirit was able to transform Saul, but it did not relieve Saul of the responsibilities of faith or obedience.

It is unclear why Saul failed to mention the kingship upon returning home. Perhaps he had doubts about what Samuel had said. More likely, Samuel wanted Saul to keep the fact a secret until the public reveal at Mizpah (v. 17).

► God's power and our response are not equal partners. The kind of faith that bears fruit in obedience flows from the assurance that God's Spirit will empower us. Obedience is the fruit of faith. Will you obey and follow Him today?

Pray with Us

Today, ask the Lord to show you what you can learn from the initial success and the ultimate failure of Saul's life. Let us learn from this example to follow God faithfully all the days of our life.

Fear of the Lord

Read 1 Samuel 11:1–14

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.—Proverbs 9:10

We usually think of fear as a reaction to something that causes negative emotions: enclosed spaces, snakes, heights, darkness, or even public speaking. But in the Bible, the term “fear” is often used to communicate the reverence we have for God. This includes a healthy fear of disappointing Him. In today’s passage, the “terror” of the Lord motivated the Israelites to respond to Saul’s first kingly act, a call to arms to deliver the people of Jabesh Gilead from Nahash the Ammonite. Was this the fear of the Lord or something else?

The Ammonites, the descendants of Lot, were the second major power that threatened Israel in Samuel’s day. Their threat to gouge out the right eye of all the men of Jabesh was typical of Ammonite brutality (v. 2). Mutilation of this sort would have been a mark of disgrace for the people of Jabesh and probably would have impeded their ability to fight.

When Saul learned of their plight,

the Spirit of God came upon him. He took a pair of oxen, cut them into pieces, and sent them throughout Israel with the message: “This is what will be done to the oxen of anyone who does not follow Saul and Samuel” (v. 7). The terror that this message produced was more than a fear of the consequences they might suffer if they disobeyed their earthly ruler. It was a fear produced by God Himself.

Their obedience to Saul’s command enabled Israel’s new king to rescue the people of Jabesh Gilead and to consolidate support for his reign. Saul was acclaimed, but he rightly attributed the victory to God (v. 13).

► Do you have a healthy “fear” or reverence for God? When we have an appropriate reverence for God, we honor Him with our thoughts, our speech, and our behavior. As you go about your day today, consider how this influences your life.

Pray with Us

Let us pray that our lives will be guided by the fear of the Lord the way the Bible teaches it—reverence for God—and not by how the world sees fear. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10).

A Leader Says Goodbye

Read 1 Samuel 12:1–25

Fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart. — 1 Samuel 12:24

As he set out for his presidential inauguration in 1861, Abraham Lincoln knew he faced a seemingly impossible task. “I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington,” Lincoln declared. This was no exaggeration. The union was dissolving, and in months the nation would be embroiled in a bloody civil war.

Samuel had a similar sense of foreboding during the public ceremony that ratified Saul as Israel’s king. More than an inauguration for Saul, it was also a farewell speech for Samuel, who was stepping down as Israel’s judge. It was time. Samuel was “old and gray” and the Israelites wanted a different leader (v. 2). True to his role as God’s spokesman, Samuel reminded the people of their history of disobedience during the days of the judges (vv. 9–11). He also pointed out the lack of faith that prompted

them to ask Samuel to appoint a king: “We want a king to rule over us” (vv. 12–13). Their demand betrayed a lack of confidence in God.

Now that God had granted their request, God’s people had a choice to make. “If you fear the LORD and serve and obey him and do not rebel against his commands, and if both you and the king who reigns over you follow the LORD your God—good!” Samuel declared. “But if you do not obey the LORD, and if you rebel against his commands, his hand will be against you, as it was against your ancestors” (v. 15). Although he was stepping down as judge, Samuel promised not to abandon God’s people (v. 23).

► Do you fear the Lord? Are you following Him well today? No matter what foolish choices you have made in the past, if you turn to Christ, He will receive you. Ask Him to forgive you and show you “what is good and right” (v. 23).

Pray with Us

Samuel didn’t shy away from rebuking his people: “If you do not obey the LORD, and if you rebel against his commands, his hand will be against you” (v. 15). Ask God if there’s anything you need to change in your life.

A False Start

Read 1 Samuel 13:1–15

The LORD has sought out a man after his own heart. — 1 Samuel 13:14

At the track meet, I watched in dismay as the front runner for our team lost his footing and fell. The cheers of the crowd quickly turned to groans. We all know that a strong start does not *always* guarantee a good finish.

In today's reading, Saul's future seemed promising. The handsome king would reign over Israel from age 30 to 72. But while Saul's victory over the Ammonites at the beginning of his reign seemed like an omen of good things to come, it would turn out to be a false start.

Saul divided his troops between himself and his son Jonathan. Jonathan's victory in Geba provoked a strong reaction when the Philistines responded with overwhelming force (v. 5). Not only their vast numbers but also their ability to deploy chariots gave the Philistines a significant advantage over the Israelite troops. Terrified by this disparity in force, many in Saul's army began to desert. Some took refuge in caves while others fled across the Jordan. Those troops who remained "were quaking

with fear" (v. 7).

Samuel had commanded Saul to wait at Gilgal for direction (1 Sam. 10:8). Instead, affected by the fear of his troops and anxious about the number of deserters, Saul attempted to force God's hand by fulfilling Samuel's role (v. 9). In his rebuke, Samuel revealed what would have happened had Saul obeyed, along with the tragic outcome of his disobedience (vv. 10–14).

Here and later, we find that Saul is a tragic figure. We are tempted to feel sorry for him. But there was more to Saul's failure than inept leadership. His refusal to wait and the decision to sacrifice sprang from a desire to manipulate God. This proved to be Saul's pattern, and, sadly, it would ultimately cost him the kingdom.

► What's the difference between praying in faith and attempting to manipulate God? Ultimately it is our attitude of submission. We pray, but God controls the outcome. God is sympathetic to our cry, but He is not under our control.

Pray with Us

Saul's life teaches us a great deal about the lack of faith and failure. If you have made similar mistakes in your own life, ask God to make you a stronger, more committed follower of Christ.

A Rash Vow

Read 1 Samuel 13:16–14:52

Do not let your mouth lead you into sin.—Ecclesiastes 5:6

Did you ever make a promise you couldn't keep? Maybe you agreed to something in haste, later regretting what you vowed? As Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 5:6, "Do not let your mouth lead you into sin." In today's passage, Saul acted contrary to this advice. Israel had demanded that God provide them with "a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles" (1 Sam. 8:20). Yet after a promising start, Saul faltered. In chapter 13, we find Saul seated under a pomegranate tree at the outskirts of Gibeah, surrounded by his troops. While Saul was holding court, God's people were hard-pressed by the Philistines.

Compared to the more professional Philistine army, Israel was outnumbered and underequipped. The Philistines had chariots and swords, while God's people had to pay their enemies to sharpen their farm implements. Only Saul and his son Jonathan had proper weapons. Between these two, it was Jonathan who proved the more daring. Eager

to engage the enemy, he and his armor-bearer executed a daring raid. Saul joined the fight when he saw that God had sent such a panic among the Philistine troops that they fought amongst themselves. Jonathan's actions demonstrated a boldness born of faith.

Saul bound his troops with a harmful oath when he pronounced a curse on anyone who ate food before the king's enemies were defeated. Saul's primary motivation was not God's glory or Israel's protection but personal revenge. The consequences of Saul's rash vow cascaded from Jonathan to the whole army, whose hunger drove them to eat the captured sheep, cattle, and calves without first draining the blood as was required by the law of Moses (Lev. 3:17; 7:25–26).

► How does a rash commitment differ from taking a leap of faith? It may be helpful to remember that faith is focused on God and shaped by the guidelines of His Word. Think and pray before you promise.

Pray with Us

Today's devotional encourages us to be faithful to our word and to seek spiritual maturity. May the Lord grant us spiritual discernment, humility, and a desire to live in a way that's pleasing to Him!

Questions & Answers

by Dr. Eric C. Redmond, Professor of Bible

Q Jesus said to “go and make disciples” (Matt. 28:19). Yet it seems we lack intentional discipleship within the modern church. How can the church more faithfully make disciples?

A Making disciples begins the moment a person trusts the gospel message. At this moment we enter into a relationship with this new brother or sister in the Lord that will allow for intentional, patient, long-term instruction in Christian living.

Instead of leaving the work of disciple-making to a church program, every believer has a responsibility to model Christ before those new in the faith. It is our privilege to give personal attention to the new believer’s growth in prayer, to model the knowledge of and obedience to the Word of God and the use of spiritual gifts, as well as share our faith and serve others.

While using a published study guide or curricula might help the discipleship process, it is no substitute for allowing a new believer to see how you handle pleasure, pain, loss, or success. We can model how a Christ follower responds to the joys and stresses of marriage, parenting, friendships, vocation, and relationships with church members. They can watch our reading, eating,

health choices, and use of leisure. As we “make disciples,” we show the other person how to yield to Christ’s Lordship in all areas of life, not only in spiritual disciplines. No class or program can replace years of walking with another person, day in and day out.

Q I’ve known people who join false religions, yet seem sincere in their quest to seek God. If people unknowingly believe a lie, are they still condemned to hear, “I never knew you” (Matt. 7:23)?

A It is true that many who join a cult or false religion do so with a sincere desire to please God as He has been presented to them by other members of that religious organization. However, sincerity does not equal innocence before God. Each person comes into the world sinful, fully rejecting God spiritually. As Romans 5:12 says, “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, *because all sinned.*”

It is important to determine what any belief system teaches about the deity of Christ. The Scripture is clear concerning the Word (Jesus) becoming flesh, and that Jesus is the

“Instead of leaving the work of disciple-making to a church program, every believer has a responsibility to model Christ before those new in the faith.”

true God and the only way to eternal life (see John 1:1–18; 1 John 5:20). The New Testament reveals that Jesus is *equal* with God the Father in all attributes of deity, and thus the substance of deity: “[Jesus], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage” (Phil. 2:6), and “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Jesus]” (Col. 1:19). Our confession of Jesus as Lord includes acknowledgment of His deity: Only God can save us from sin.

Believing the lies of a false religion is not what condemns a person. Only a failure to place faith in Christ—God the Son—dooms one to perish. Therefore, we pray for the Lord to reveal the truth of Christ, in mercy, to all people.

Q Why doesn’t the Holy Spirit intervene in the lives of people deceived by cults and lead them to Jesus Christ?

A Many of us experience the pain of knowing a person led astray by a cult. We might wonder, *Why didn’t God intervene in that person’s life?* People join cults because they are spiritually blind (Eph. 4:18–21). They reject the gospel of their own volition because they have “refused to love the

truth and so be saved” (2 Thess. 2:10). The fact that the Holy Spirit is the one who gives new life should motivate us, since it means God can work in a way that we cannot.

God is sovereign, He has the freedom to do as He wills (Psalms 115:3; 135:6). This includes saving whomever He chooses: “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion” (Rom. 9:15). We also know that God’s mercy flows from His character as “the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6).

Understanding the character of God, should give us a sense of hope as we reach out to the people in our lives who have not heard or understood the gospel. The surprising conversion of the apostle Paul is a reminder that Jesus “came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15). We should not assume that anyone is beyond the reach of God’s grace. ■

A King Rejected

Read 1 Samuel 15:1–35

To obey is better than sacrifice.—1 Samuel 15:22

In his book *The God Delusion*, atheist Richard Dawkins accused the God portrayed in the Old Testament of being “arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction” and “a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser.” Dawkins may have based his accusations on today’s reading. Modern readers find it hard to accept God’s command that Saul should “totally destroy” everything that belonged to the Amalekites, including “men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys” (v. 3).

The Amalekites, descendants of Esau, were marauders who attacked Israel during the Exodus when they were camped at Rephidim. At that time, the Lord promised to “completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven” (Ex. 17:14). He did not rush to fulfill this threat but waited almost four hundred years before carrying it out. For this reason, the task assigned to Saul, even though it disturbs modern sensibilities, is a testimony to God’s patience as

much as it is a sobering reminder of His relentless justice.

Instead of completing the task as assigned, Saul spared their leader Agag along with the best of the animals (v. 9). Bible scholar Robert Alter notes, “There is a morally scandalous pairing in the select massacre Saul and his troop perpetrate: they kill all the defective animals and every man, woman, child and infant, while sparing the good, edible animals, and the king (perhaps with the idea that some further profit can be extracted from him).” In this way, Saul perverted God’s justice by turning it into an exercise in opportunism; he kept the very best for himself. Even worse, Saul spiritualized his disobedience (v. 13). Obedience is better than sacrifice, and Christ’s perfect obedience is the only remedy for our sin.

► We cannot fool God with spiritual posturing. Nor can we compensate for our disobedience. The only remedy for God’s stern justice is the grace of Christ. Jesus alone can “fulfill all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15).

Pray with Us

Today’s Scripture reading brings us back to Jesus’ victory on the cross. We praise Him for His sacrifice and His perfect obedience—the only remedy for our sin. Pray that we will always keep our eyes on Jesus.

What God Sees

Read 1 Samuel 16:1–23

People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart. — 1 Samuel 16:7

Some say the modern age of image-oriented political campaigning began in 1960 with the first televised presidential debate between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon. On camera, Kennedy seemed more comfortable than Nixon, whose appearance and awkward manner made him appear less confident to viewers.

Beauty may only be skin deep, but we often make judgments about people's character based solely on their appearance. Saul might have looked the part of a king, but by his actions he was proving to be deficient in faith. God's choice for Saul's replacement would be surprising; He chose the least likely of Jesse's eight sons. When David's older brother Eliab presented himself to Samuel, the prophet was convinced he was God's chosen. "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him," the Lord warned. "The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the

outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (v. 7). David was the least likely to be selected. He was the youngest of all Jesse's sons and wasn't even invited to attend. He was tending the sheep (v. 10).

With the anointing of David, the Holy Spirit departed from Saul and an evil Spirit "from the LORD" tormented him (v. 14). Some commentators believe this wasn't a demon but a "spirit of disaster" sent from God. However, the New Testament makes it clear that even the demons can go no further than God allows (Matt. 8:31–32). Whatever its nature, it is clear that the arrival of this spirit was both divine judgment and the means God used to introduce David to Saul and his court.

► There is much more to godly leadership than image. This is why the qualifications for church leaders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 focus mainly on a person's character. Leadership is about *being* as much as it is about *doing*.

Pray with Us

"The LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). Make today's key verse the focus of your prayer time. Ask the Lord to show you those things in your life you may consider important, but in reality they are just "the outward appearance."

Gigantic Faith

Read 1 Samuel 17:1–58

Everything is possible for one who believes.—Mark 9:23

I was not raised in a Christian home. For the first 20 years of my life, I read very little of the Bible. But even as a child I knew the story of David and Goliath. The Scripture's account of David's defeat of the Philistine champion who towered over the Israelites at nine feet has become the archetypal underdog story.

Make no mistake. This is not an account of pluck or even courage. It is a story about faith. David's conviction that God could use him to defeat Goliath was not an exercise in positive thinking. David's faith had been proven in a variety of smaller encounters while he served as a shepherd watching over his father's flocks (vv. 34–37). Because of this, David was shocked to arrive at the battlefield and find the armies of Israel cowering in fear (v. 24). Eliab's reaction when he overheard David questioning the men about the situation confirmed the Lord's wisdom in choosing David over Eliab.

David also exercised common sense when he refused the honor of wearing Saul's armor and chose to meet Goliath carrying only his familiar staff, shepherd's bag, and sling (v. 40). These were the weapons God had used when David faced the lion and the bear. He saw no reason why God could not use them to defeat Goliath as well. You know how the story ends.

It is not a story about how the small can defeat the large. It is a story that reminds us that the victory belongs to God who is greater than all. Faith is not a feeling of confidence, so much as it is an attitude of dependence on Him!

► We may be tempted to think that effective faith is a matter of volume. But a mere grain of faith is all that is needed! Your faith may not be as great as your present need, but you serve a God who is greater than both.

Pray with Us

As the story of David's victory over Goliath shows, faith is not about confidence, but about our dependence on God. Thank the Father for showing Himself faithful and strong in your life. You can always depend on Him!

The Poison of Envy

Read 1 Samuel 18:1–30

Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.—1 Peter 2:1

When I was growing up, my parents used to buy my shoes at a little shop at the end of our block. Getting a new pair of shoes was always a big deal, an event that warranted a family expedition. Maybe that's why I remember being very upset when the new shoes were intended for my brother or sister instead of me.

Envy is the devil's little hammer, bending our hearts until it turns us against anyone who possesses what we want. Envy poisons our desires and weaponizes them. Envy is the indignation we feel toward those who have what we think should have been ours. But ultimately, it is an outrage that is directed at God Himself.

This sense of outrage is fueled by a conviction that the prosperity, opportunity, or blessing that we desire has gone to the wrong person.

Satan used envy to turn Saul against David after he had won the hearts of Saul's son and the people of Israel. When Saul heard the

women singing of David's victory over Goliath (v. 7), he became angry. "They have credited David with tens of thousands," he thought, "but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?" (v. 8). At that point Saul began to distance himself both emotionally and physically from David. His actions turned against him, and he sent David out to fight in the hope that the Philistines would kill him (v. 25).

David's success was a reminder to Saul that the Lord's favor was no longer on him. Envy gave way to fear. Saul "remained [David's] enemy the rest of his days" (v. 29). Envy not only made Saul David's enemy but God's as well.

► Recovery from envy requires that we redirect our focus and reprioritize our desires. We don't need to stop desiring. Our desires need a conversion. Envy cannot be tamed; it can only be put to death by the cross.

Pray with Us

Today's Scripture warns about the consequences of envy and reminds us to confess hidden sin. Praise God for our freedom and forgiveness of sin, given to us as a gift by Christ's victory on the cross.

The Shield of God

Read 1 Samuel 19:1–24

*My shield is God Most High,
who saves the upright in heart. —Psalm 7:10*

According to tradition, the emperor Constantine saw a vision of a blazing cross against the sun and words which said, “In this sign, you will conquer.” Constantine’s troops placed this symbol, made up of the Greek letters Chi and Rho, on their shields. He believed it would be their certain defense in battle.

David’s shield of protection was God Himself. Today’s reading shows how the Lord shielded David from Saul’s attempts to take his life. In the first instance, when Saul told his son and servants to kill David, Jonathan reasoned him out of it (vv. 4–5). Saul vowed to spare David, but his resolve was only temporary. After a string of military successes, Saul made another murderous attempt on David’s life when he “tried to pin him to the wall with a spear” (v. 10). This was the third time Saul had attempted to kill David in this manner (1 Sam. 18:11). Next, Saul sent men to lie in wait for David

at his house. David’s wife Michal helped him to escape.

Saul’s sense that the kingdom was being torn from his grasp was no doubt aggravated by the knowledge that David had won the allegiance of the king’s son and daughter. Fleeing for his life, David escaped Saul’s household and took refuge with Samuel. When Saul sent troops to kill David, the Spirit of God overtook them, and they were unable to complete their mission. Saul sent two more companies of soldiers, but the same thing happened. Finally, Saul came, and “the Spirit of God came even on him” (v. 23). This was a demonstration of God’s power, as well as an ironic reminder of Saul’s initial call to kingship.

► You may not be a skilled soldier like David, but if you belong to Christ, you too are under God’s protection. “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” is His promise (Matt. 28:20).

Pray with Us

Is the Lord your shield of protection? The same God who protected King David is your shield as well! If you belong to Christ, He is with you always. Ask, and He will help you trust and rely on Him more.

Friends in Faith

Read 1 Samuel 20:1–42

A man's enemies will be the members of his own household.—Matthew 10:36

When Jesus began His public ministry, His family was shocked. At one point, when He was preaching to a large crowd in a house, his family members tried to remove Him by force, claiming that He had lost His mind (Mark 3:21). Jesus warned His followers that allegiance to Him would create fault lines in some of our most important relationships.

Jonathan shared a similar experience when he threw his lot in with David. At first, Jonathan wanted to believe that there was still hope that his father could be favorable toward David (vv. 2, 9). But David, who by now has seen the king make several attempts on his life, was understandably skeptical (v. 3). The two formulated a plan that would enable Jonathan to sound out his father.

To seal it, Jonathan entered into a covenant in which David promised to show him “unfailing kindness like the LORD’s kindness” (v. 14). Jonathan,

in turn, asked the Lord to “call David’s enemies to account” (v. 16). Jonathan would have realized that he was speaking of his father, Saul, when he made this promise to his friend. Jonathan also knew that his decision to support David was an implicit renunciation of any claim he might have to succeed Saul as king (v. 31).

Jonathan’s choice was decidedly not political. He and David had “sworn friendship with each other in the name of the LORD” (v. 42). Theirs was a lifelong commitment based on a common faith in God as much as it was a union of like-minded friends.

► Have you experienced rejection from friends or family because of your faith? Jesus promised, “. . . no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life” (Luke 18:29–30).

Pray with Us

David and Jonathan were friends in faith! Thank God for the true and wise friends He’s given you over the years. And praise the Lord for His friendship—“What a Friend We Have in Jesus”!

Desperate Measures

Read 1 Samuel 21:1–22:20

*I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings
until the disaster has passed. — Psalm 57:1*

In his first inaugural address, delivered at the height of the Great Depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously declared, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.” Fear is a powerful force and will often drive a person to take desperate measures.

David’s flight from Saul took him first to Nob, located about three miles south of Gibeah and two miles east of Jerusalem, where the tabernacle was located. David lied about the purpose of his visit to Ahimelek and asked for supplies. All that was available was the consecrated bread that was placed before the Lord in the tabernacle and then eaten by the priests (Lev. 24:5–9). He also took Goliath’s sword, which had been kept there as a memorial of David’s victory. Unfortunately, Doeg, an Edomite servant of King Saul, also witnessed this exchange (21:7). He would later inform Saul.

David left Nob and retreated southwest into enemy territory until he came to Goliath’s hometown of Gath, where the servants of its ruler Achish spotted him. When they raised the alarm, David pretended to be insane to show that he was not a threat. He returned to the territory of Judah and took refuge in the cave of Adullam. David’s family went to him there in part to avoid any retaliation from Saul. David did not remain in the cave of Adullam but left his parents in Moab and then returned to Judah. Meanwhile, Saul ordered his men to execute Ahimelech and the other priests at Nob. When his men were unwilling to comply, Doeg the Edomite killed them, along with the women, children, infants, and animals.

► Are you struggling with fear today? In his desperation, David looked to the Lord. Give your worries to God by reading aloud the words from Psalm 57 which express David’s thoughts during his flight from Saul.

Pray with Us

As you pray, ask God to help you give your fears and worries to Him. Look at King David’s example and use his strategies of overcoming fear, anxiety, and anger that he expressed so well in his psalms.

Guided by God

Read 1 Samuel 23:1–29

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me.—Psalm 23:4*

Did you know that the average man will travel 900 miles while being *lost*? A study sponsored by a company that makes GPS devices also revealed that men are typically the ones who refuse to stop and ask for directions. Many reasons have been suggested for this behavior. The most basic may be that it is humbling.

While on the run from Saul, David sought direction from God: “Once again David inquired of the LORD, and the LORD answered him” (v. 4). Today’s reading describes two instances when David asked the Lord to guide him. The means David used when deciding whether or not to defend the border town of Keilah is not stated (v. 2). But in the second instance, David sought guidance using the ephod, a tunic that the high priest wore (v. 9). This garment included a pouch for the Urim and Thummim, lots which the priest used to discern the will of God. Their exact nature is unknown, but some think that they were made up of two gems that rendered a yes

or no answer. Using that information, directed by God, David eluded Saul. Clearly God was in control: “God did not give David into [Saul’s] hands” (v. 14).

After being directed by God to flee Keilah, David roamed the wilderness pursued by Saul. Jonathan found him there and “helped him find strength in God” (v. 16). Jonathan reminded David of God’s calling. But the people who lived in the desert of Ziph where David was hiding betrayed his location to Saul. This led to a showdown in the wilderness of Maon. Saul suddenly abandoned the assault when he received word that the Philistines were “raiding the land” (v. 27). David relocated to the strongholds of En Gedi.

► Like David, we receive guidance from God in three major ways. First, God provides clear direction through His Word. Second, He guides us through wise counsel from others. Third, He often confirms His direction through circumstances.

Pray with Us

Praise the Lord! Even when we feel lost, He finds us and gives direction, and He always gives us second chances. Thank Him for His guidance today—whether through His Word, wise counsel, or circumstances.

Let the Lord Judge

Read 1 Samuel 24:1–22

God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked.—Ecclesiastes 3:17

A popular saying goes, “I don’t get mad. I get even.” Another word for this is *revenge*. It is not unusual for people to want to see those who have treated them unjustly punished. Even those who are godly have sometimes prayed that the Lord would execute vengeance on the unjust (Jer. 11:20; 20:12).

David had an opportunity to take vengeance into his own hands when Saul decided to use the cave where David and his men were hiding as a public restroom (v. 3). The king was alone and distracted. Saul was so distracted that David was able to get close enough to cut off a corner of the king’s robe without being noticed. In addition to proving Saul’s vulnerability, this act may have symbolized the transfer of the kingdom to David (1 Sam. 15:27–28).

David’s men believed that God had delivered his enemy into their hands. They urged him to strike Saul down (v. 4). David, however, felt guilty about what he had done. He was

“conscience-stricken” because of Saul’s position as his “master” and as “the Lord’s anointed” (vv. 5–6). After leaving the cave and relocating to a safe distance David called out to Saul, pointing out what he had done (and could have done) and reaffirming his loyalty to the king. “Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you” (v. 10).

Saul reacted emotionally to the event and wept aloud, saying to David: “You are more righteous than I” (v. 17). God, who had appointed Saul as king, would depose him in due time and bring David to the throne. But David refused to take the matter into his own hands. Payback is not ours. It is God’s prerogative.

► David wisely recognized that circumstances are not always a clear indicator of God’s will. He also understood that vengeance is the Lord’s (Deut. 32:35). Has someone treated you unjustly? God knows your case. Trust Him to settle your accounts.

Pray with Us

Will you trust God today to settle your accounts with others, even if you feel you have the right for revenge? God is everyone’s righteous Judge! May His eternal salvation and mercy be your source of confidence and hope.

Wise and Courageous Words

Read 1 Samuel 25:1–44

*Whoever is patient has great understanding,
but one who is quick-tempered displays folly.—Proverbs 14:29*

According to the Mayo Clinic, impulsive anger disorder is a pattern of behavior marked by “repeated, sudden episodes of impulsive, aggressive, violent behavior or angry verbal outbursts in which you react grossly out of proportion to the situation.” Its symptoms include rage, irritability, racing thoughts, and threats. What separates impulsive anger disorder from regular anger? Probably the frequency with which one experiences it and the context in which that anger is expressed.

David was understandably angry at being rebuffed after asking wealthy Nabal to share something with him during the sheep shearing festival. He and his men had provided a barrier that protected Nabal’s goods and servants from marauding Philistines (vv. 7–8). But Nabal also accused David of being little more than a runaway slave. Perhaps it was the insult, or maybe it was sparked by grief over the death of Samuel. Whatever the reason, David’s anger spiraled into a

grim determination to answer with force (vv. 13, 21–22).

If it had not been for the quick thinking and wise words of Abigail, the result would have been disastrous for Nabal’s entire household and perhaps for David’s reputation as well. Not only did Abigail show herself to be a wise woman but a courageous one as well. She risked her life to protect her household and to remind David of God’s promises (vv. 28–31). Nabal was stricken when he heard what had happened, perhaps by a stroke or a heart attack. But verse 38 indicates that he died by the Lord’s hand. Abigail is the hero of this story. God used her to advise David and keep him from acting rashly. Anger is not always sinful, but when we act upon it without thinking, it often leads to sin.

► Do you often react in anger? Ephesians 4:26–27 warns, “In your anger do not sin’: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.”

Pray with Us

In your life, what may cause you to be angry and act on it rashly? Be encouraged by the lesson of today’s devotional. God is faithful and He will take you through. Thank Him in prayer today!

Resisting Revenge

Read 1 Samuel 26:1–25

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.— Romans 12:19

New Tribes missionaries Martin and Gracia Burnham were kidnapped and held for more than a year by terrorists in the Philippines, an ordeal that ended with Martin's death. In the book that describes her experience, Gracia tells how the Scriptures were a source of comfort to her. One Sunday, she found a piece of paper and began writing down all the promises of God she could remember. "A couple of days later, when I was in a slightly less spiritual mood," Gracia writes, "I thought of another divine promise to add to my list: 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord' (Rom. 12:19)."

David resisted the temptation to take revenge on Saul once before (1 Samuel 24). He had another opportunity while hiding in the hill country east of Ziph. At that time, he snuck into Saul's camp while the king was sleeping. David's nephew Abishai offered to pin Saul to the ground with one thrust of a spear, arguing that God had delivered the king into David's

hands. Once more, David chose to leave matters in God's hands. He explained to Abishai, "The LORD forbid that I should lay a hand on the LORD's anointed" (v. 11).

Saul's behavior continued to be erratic and although he admitted sin in verse 21, David was not inclined to trust him and asked for his spear in verse 22. David balanced his desire for retribution with His belief that vengeance belonged to God alone. As Christians, we often use the language of grace. We sing: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." It is one thing to sing about being a wretch. But it is something else to have to worship next to a person who acts like a wretch. Although we often sing about grace, we sometimes long for revenge.

► Patience informed by faith is the remedy for revenge. When we leave room for God, we open the door not only to justice but also to the possibility that God may offer others the same grace that He has shown us.

Pray with Us

King David's life story of God guiding, forgiving, and restoring him reassures us of God's love. The Lord's mercy and love are available to us in the same way. Nothing can separate us from His love!

Fear and Faith

Read 1 Samuel 27:1–28:2

Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.—John 14:27

Feeling a bit discouraged today? Being a Christ follower does not mean you will never have difficult days. “Usually cheerful as we may be, we must at intervals be cast down,” declared 19th-century preacher Charles Spurgeon, “The strong are not always vigorous, the wise not always ready, the brave not always courageous, and the joyous not always happy.”

David also had moments of profound discouragement. Today’s reading begins by noting how David sought refuge with the Philistine ruler Achish in Gath out of fear (v. 1). The last time David went to Achish, Philistine suspicion forced him to feign madness to escape. This time David’s status as Saul’s enemy earned him a welcome that enabled him to operate clandestinely behind enemy lines. He raided the Geshurites, the Girzites, and the Amalekites, people occupying land that God had promised to Judah. David targeted them because they were the people who had lived in Canaan “from ancient times” (v. 8).

The Lord had commanded Israel to make war against them at the time of the Exodus (Ex. 17:15–16; Deut. 25:17–19).

Was David’s decision to deceive Achish a strategic move or a desperate one? The biblical text does not criticize David for taking such actions. David managed to walk the razor’s edge by defending Achish while defeating Israel’s enemies at the same time. But this subterfuge also placed David in an extremely vulnerable position (1 Sam. 28:1–2). Faith is not the absence of fear but the conviction that God is greater than our fears. The greatest danger of fear is that it can also displace faith, causing us to lose sight of God.

► Are you struggling with fear or discouragement today? Let those emotions point you to God. Pray this prayer of David’s from Psalm 56:3–4: “When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise—in God I trust and am not afraid.”

Pray with Us

Coming to the end of this month’s study, reflect on what we’ve learned. During your prayer time, ask: Am I listening to God’s call? Do I recognize His voice? Am I ready to follow?

The Silence of God

Read 1 Samuel 28:3–25

*Seek the LORD while he may be found;
call on him while he is near.—Isaiah 55:6*

Many people find silence to be awkward. Studies have shown that long pauses in conversation can produce negative emotions in some people. Maybe this happens because silence is often perceived as a sign of disagreement.

Saul was terrified by God's silence because it was a sign of rejection. Samuel's death further accentuated Saul's sense of being cut off from God's guidance. When the Philistine army massed against Israel at Shunem, Saul inquired of the Lord but got no response (v. 6). In desperation, Saul demanded that his servants find a medium, someone who claimed to have the power to communicate with the spirits of the dead. According to the Law of Moses, anyone who practiced divination or sorcery, interpreted omens, engaged in witchcraft, cast spells, or was a medium or spiritist who consulted the dead was "detestable to the Lord" (Deut. 18:12).

Saul had expelled those who practiced such arts. However, his

servants knew of a woman in Endor who continued to practice such things. The text indicates that the spirit that appeared to the woman was not merely her imagination or an apparition but was indeed Samuel (v. 15). Samuel repeated what he had already told Saul and predicted Israel's defeat in the coming battle, as well as the king's death (vv. 16–19). Upon hearing this news, Saul collapsed from terror and hunger (v. 20).

Saul's encounter with Samuel confirms that life and consciousness continue after physical death (see also this month's "Practical Theology" column). But another lesson is that the Bible universally condemns the practice of occult arts. Séances, mediums, Tarot cards, Ouija boards, and astrology all fall into this category.

► Guidance from God comes primarily through His Word. As believers, we are not to look to fortune-tellers, astrology, or consult spirits for direction. Scripture condemns these practices!

Pray with Us

Remember, God's silence is not a sign of His rejection. God may seem silent because He is listening. Ask Him to help you hear His call, even if it's a "still, small voice" or a gentle whisper.

In Harm's Way

Read 1 Samuel 29:1–11

The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid.—Psalm 118:6

Some television drama series involve multiple storylines. These complex narratives weave in and out but are usually all part of one larger story. The same is true of biblical narratives. As storm clouds gathered for Saul, David was facing a different kind of jeopardy when the Philistine forces gathered at Aphek in preparation for battle. If this were a movie, the events depicted in these verses would be a brief flashback to the previous day.

When the Philistine armies massed to attack Israel, some of the commanders questioned David's presence. Although Achish defended David's loyalty, the king's leaders pointed out that betrayal might be a way for David to earn his way back into Saul's good graces. After all, since he had rebelled against one king, what would keep him from betraying another? Perhaps this was David's plan all along. What is clear is that David's role as Achish's bodyguard placed him in an awkward position. Defending himself against Saul's pursuit was one

thing. Taking the side of the Philistines in their attempt to destroy Israel was something else. It does not seem likely that David would have gone to war against Israel. His position in the rear as Achish's bodyguard would have been the perfect trap.

Was David's protest in verse 8 genuine or merely an act? Either way, it seems likely that the suspicion of the Philistine commanders endangered his life. If David was truly a threat to the Philistines, what would stop him from attacking from another direction? The more strategic choice would have been to make David a prisoner or perhaps even to kill him. God used David's enemies to rescue him from this impossible situation. But we will see tomorrow that David's troubles are far from over.

► God's intervention in our lives is not always direct. He often uses circumstances and unlikely people to protect us. In what ways have you seen God direct your life?

Pray with Us

David's words, "The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid" (Ps. 118:6), prompt our prayer of gratitude: Lord Jesus, we praise you for your presence in our lives, for your protection and guidance, and for delivering us from the prison of sin.

Finding Strength in God

Read 1 Samuel 30:1–31

David found strength in the LORD his God.—1 Samuel 30:6

“Out of the frying pan and into the fire” describes the feeling when you pass from one trouble only to find yourself in another difficult situation. Just when you breathe a sigh of relief that your troubles are over, you find yourself in a hot spot again.

Today’s passage paints exactly that type of situation for David. Perhaps he breathed a sigh of relief after leaving Achish behind. But if David expected to find rest, he was mistaken. While David had been with Achish, Amalekite raiders had burned Ziklag and carried off the women and children. Exhausted by travel and overcome with grief, David and his men “wept aloud until they had no strength left to weep” (v. 4). Sorrow gave way to anger as the men held David responsible for their loss. Having been called a traitor by the Philistine commanders, now David faced accusations from his men. They were so angry that they talked about stoning him. Instead of panicking, “David found strength in the Lord his God” (v. 6).

Like Saul, David sought direction from the Lord by asking Abiathar the priest to bring the ephod. This priestly garment contained the Urim and Thummim, two gemstones used for divine guidance. But unlike Saul, the Lord responded to David’s inquiry, reassuring him that they would be able to overtake the raiding party and rescue the captives. However, one-third of David’s men were too exhausted to continue the pursuit. They stayed with the baggage in the Besor Valley. When David and his men returned, “the evil men and troublemakers” in the group complained that those who stayed behind should not get a share of the spoils. David reminded them that God was responsible for the victory. Those who stayed received the same reward as those who went to the battle.

► Does it seem like troubles are following you? Even though you may not see the light at the end of the tunnel, you can be certain that God knows and controls the ending of your story. Rest in Him today.

Pray with Us

Lord, thank you for the reminder today that your call involves not only action but also rest. Show us the ways to step away from striving and to find respite in your love, grace, and mercy.

Death of a King

Read 1 Samuel 31:1–13

*Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
he has rejected you as king. — 1 Samuel 15:23*

Although this Old Testament book gets its name from Samuel, one of its main characters, its primary focus is the contrast between Saul and David. Saul's story unfolds like a great tragedy. His failure is foreshadowed at the outset, and all subsequent events move toward this sad conclusion. Today's reading reveals the final chapter in Saul's story. His life ended just as Samuel had predicted.

The Philistines dishonored Saul's body in death, fastening it to the city wall of Beth Shan as a token of their victory (v. 10). The men of Jabesh Gilead recovered the king's body in a daring night-time raid and buried the bones beneath a Tamarisk tree. Saul's first victory as king had been to rescue the people of Jabesh Gilead from the Ammonites (1 Sam. 11:1–11). Saul's greatest tragedy was his lack of faith. He did not listen to the Lord and often took matters into his own hands. In the final scene of this tragedy, Saul's weak character is on full display. Critically wounded by the archers,

Saul begged his shield-bearer to finish the job. When the shield-bearer refused, Saul fell on his own sword.

What was the difference between Saul and David? David was a bold warrior, but it was not boldness that was the secret to his success. Ultimately, the difference between these two kings was a matter of faith. As Israel's next king, David would go on to greater success. He would also have his own share of spectacular failures. But faith always led David back to God's grace and forgiveness. This is why the Lord considered David "a man after his own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14). David turned his ear to God, and obeyed His commands. David was a man of faith.

► We have learned many lessons from Samuel, David, and Saul. We have seen that courage is admirable, but faith is even more essential. And we are encouraged to turn our ear and our heart to God, honoring Him with every step of our life.

Pray with Us

In conclusion, ask the Lord to help us remember the lessons He has taught us about His call, His love, courage, and forgiveness. May we listen to God's words to us with our hearts. Thank you for studying and praying with us!

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