



PORTRAITS
OF
DEVOTION





BETH
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BIBLE—STUDY

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DAY 1

Genesis 1:26–2:3

God saw all that He had made, and it was very good (v. 31a).

Can you imagine the fellowship of the Trinity on the seventh day? As they rested and looked upon the very good work they had accomplished, one planet had been tended like no other to our knowledge. Perfectly placed in the universe with adequate distance from sun, moon, and stars to sustain human life, it was chosen for divine infiltration.

“For God loved the world.” Scripture doesn’t tell us He loved the sun, the most impressive of the heavenly bodies we can see. Nor are we told that He loved the stars, even though He knows every one of them by name. John goes out of his way, however, to tell us that God loved the world.

In a universe so vast, so incomprehensible, why does God single out one little planet to love? Beloved, absorb this into the marrow of your bones: because we are on it. As despicable as humanity can be, God loves us. Inconceivably, we are His treasures, His prize creation. He can’t help it. He just loves us. So much, in fact, that He did something I, with my comparatively pitiful love for my children, would not do for anyone. He “gave His One and Only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16 HCSB).

Dear one, let it fall afresh. I myself am overcome with emotion. Elohim is so huge; we are so small. Yet the vastness of His love—so high, so wide, so deep, so long—envelops us like the endless universe envelops a crude little planet God first called Earth.

My Amanda was one of the dreamiest, most tenderhearted toddlers you can imagine. I often stooped down to talk to her so I could look her right in those big blue-green eyes. Every time I squatted down to talk to her, she squatted down, too . . . and there we’d be. The gesture was so precious I always had to fight the urge to laugh. I dared not, because she was often very serious about those contemplative moments between the two of us.

Of his God, the psalmist wrote, “Your right hand sustains me; you stoop down to make me great” (Ps. 18:35). The Amplified Version says it this way: “Your gentleness and condescension have made me great.” I don’t think the Scripture applies to us in the modern world’s terms of greatness. I think it says of us, “You stoop down and make me significant.” Yes, indeed. And when the God of all the universe stoops down and a single child recognizes the tender condescension and bends her knee to stoop as well, the heart of God surges with unbridled emotion. And there they are. Just the two of them.



DAY 2

Genesis 17:1–11

—❧—

“This is My covenant, which you are to keep, between Me and you and your offspring after you: Every one of your males must be circumcised” (v. 10).

—❧—

Paul grew up in an orthodox Jewish home in a Gentile city. The Bible gives us only a few pieces of information about his upbringing, but based on these tidbits, we may draw a number of conclusions. The following narrative describes the events that most likely took place soon after his birth. The story line is fictional to help you picture the events, but the circumstances and practices are drawn from Scripture and the Jewish code of law.

“I thank Thee, O living and eternal King, Who hast mercifully restored my soul within me; Thy faithfulness is great.”¹

The words fell from his tongue while his eyes were still heavy from the night’s rest. His morning prayers invited unexpected emotion this particular dawn as he soberly considered the honor that lay before him. Eight days had passed since the birth of his friend’s son. Today would be the child’s *Berit Milah*, an infant boy’s first initiation into Judaism. He would stand beside the father at the infant’s circumcision in the role of *sandek*, the Jewish godfather, assuming solemn responsibility—second only to the parents—over the child’s devout religious upbringing.

He had intended to arrive first so he could assist the father with preparations, but a few members of the Minyan, a quorum of ten Jewish men, had already gathered at the door. The small house was filled with people. The father, a Pharisee and Roman citizen, was an impressive man. He was one of a few men in the community who seemed to command a certain amount of respect from both Jew and Gentile. When all had finally gathered, the ceremony began. The sandek took his place in a chair next to the father, who remained standing. The infant was placed on the sandek’s knees, and the father leaned over him with greatest care to oversee the circumcision of his beloved son. He then handed the knife to the *mohel*, the most upright and expert circumcisor available in Tarsus. The father watched anxiously for the interval between the cutting of the foreskin and its actual removal. He could not help but smile as he competed with his wailing son for the attention of the quorum as he spoke the benediction, “Who hath sanctified us by His commandments and hath commanded us to bring him into the covenant of our father Abraham.”² With the exception of the sandek, all who gathered stood for the ceremony and responded to this benediction with the words, “Just as he has been initiated into the covenant, so may he be initiated into the study of the Torah, to his nuptial [marriage] canopy, and to the performance of good deeds.”³

No one could deny the blessings of good health God had already bestowed on the infant boy. The sandek had to hold him securely between his calloused palms to keep the child from squirming completely off his lap. His tiny face was blood red, his volume at full scale. This may have been his first bout with anger, but it would not be his last. Had the ceremony not held such sober significance, the sandek might have snickered at the infant's zeal. He dared not grin, but he did wonder if God was. The child lying on his lap was yet another piece of tangible evidence that God was faithful to do as He promised. Yes, God had been faithful to a thousand generations.

The circumcision was completed but not soon enough for the master of ceremonies. The sandek cradled the child with a moment's comfort and then handed him to his father, whose voice resonated throughout the candlelit home, "His name is Saul!" A perfectly noble name for a Hebrew boy from the tribe of Benjamin, named for the first king of the chosen nation of Israel. A fine choice met with great approval. While a great feast ensued, the mother slipped the agitated infant from his father's arms and excused herself to nurse the child.

Custom demanded that the father host a feast to the limits of his wealth. A man who offered less than he could afford at his son's circumcision was entirely improper. If baby Saul's father was anything at all, he was painfully proper. Yes, this would indeed be a child well reared. "I have much to learn from the father of Saul," the sandek surmised.

Darkness was quickly falling when the sandek and his wife finally reached their home. The day had been long but the fellowship sweet. Gathered with those who feared God and worshiped Him only, he had almost forgotten this city was not their own. Tarsus, the city of the Greeks, had given birth to another Hebrew. "Dear wife," the sandek thought out loud, "our Saul seems special, does he not?"

"Dear man," she teased, "he looked like every other eight-day-old infant boy I've ever seen: mad as a wronged ruler!" They both laughed heartily. She prepared for bed as he reached for the Torah, trying to fight off the sleep quickly overtaking him. He repeated the words of the *Shema*, and then he walked over to the *mezuzah* fastened to the doorpost of the house and placed his fingers on it. He responded to the touch with the familiar words of his own father every night of his life, "The Lord is my keeper."¹ He crawled into bed and smiled once again. Then he whispered as his thoughts drifted into the night, "I still say he's special. Full of zeal, he is. Just something about him . . ."



DAY 3

Deuteronomy 6:4–9

“Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them be a symbol on your forehead.
Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (vv. 8–9).

By the time Saul was thirteen years of age, he was considered a son of the law. He assumed all the religious responsibilities of the adult Jew. He started wearing phylacteries, called tefillin, during weekday morning prayers. Phylacteries were made up of two black leather cubes with long leather straps. Each cube held certain passages from the Torah written on strips of parchment. Saul wore one of the cubes on his left arm facing his heart. The other cube was placed in the center of his forehead. The leather straps on the left arm were wound precisely seven times around his arm.

The *Code of Jewish Law* prescribed that a Jewish man thirteen years or older was to put on the tefillin at the first moment in the morning when enough daylight was present to recognize a neighbor at a distance of four cubits.⁵ These practices seem very strange to us perhaps, but we should appreciate their attempt to interpret Scripture as literally as they knew how.

Exodus 13:9 says the annual observance of the Feast of Unleavened Bread was to “serve as a sign for you on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth” (HCSB). You can see that for the strict Jew, the phylacteries were a literal act of obedience.

The left arm was chosen because it was ordinarily the weaker. They were to wear God’s Word as a banner and shield over their weakness. We don’t practice the outward expression of the Jew, but we are wise to share the inward principle.

Saul would have placed the phylacteries around his forehead and arm in total silence. If interrupted while putting on the phylacteries on any given morning, he would have started the procedure all over again, repeating the appropriate benedictions. You see, a thirteen-year-old Hebrew boy could not even get out of bed in the morning without remembering to whom he belonged. As he wound the straps of the phylacteries around his head and arm, he was reminded of his binding relationship to his Creator. Soberly he assumed the responsibility of one associated with God. The law of the Lord was his life.





DAY 4

1 Samuel 1:1–8

“Hannah, why are you crying?” her husband Elkanah asked. “Why won’t you eat? Why are you troubled? Am I not better to you than 10 sons?” (v. 8).

One of the blessed gifts God has given our ministry over the years is Lee Sizemore, who long produced our videos with LifeWay Christian Resources. When we were talking about David and the forces that shaped his life, the time in which he lived, and the people who preceded him, Lee said, “In video production terms, that is David’s ‘back story.’”

What a wonderful term. We all come with a “back story.” Some of us come with a heritage of faith and faithfulness. Some of us come with the testimony of God’s ability to rescue us from terrible circumstances.

So to understand and appreciate David, we need to venture into his back story, where we get to meet both some heroic characters and some despicable ones.

We will look in the coming days at one of the high points in David’s back story, looking at the time when Samuel anointed him to be the king. But we would have no Samuel without a brave and obedient mother named Hannah.

As 1 Samuel begins, we meet Elkanah and his two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah was childless. They had gone up to the tabernacle at Shiloh to offer sacrifices.

Because the LORD had closed her [Hannah’s] womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. Elkanah her husband would say to her, “Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don’t you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?” (1 Sam. 1:6–8).

I’m sorry to report that Elkanah reminds me of one of the thinly developed characters in a TV sitcom. To his credit we read of his making the appropriate sacrifices with his family, but we also find he is married to two wives. Ultimately the word “clueless” comes to mind to describe Elkanah. There he is, married to two wives, one of them childless in a society where childbearing is everything. And the wife with children is torturing the wife without. In that situation he said, “Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don’t you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?”

Does this guy deserve the “I just don’t get it” award, or what? I’m jumping ahead, but when Hannah gave birth to Samuel and later prepared to give him up to be reared by the priests, instead of making an attempt at leadership or at least just an opinion, Elkanah said to his wife: “Do what seems best to you” (1 Sam. 1:23).

Guys, don’t follow Elkanah’s example. Get involved at home. If God has given you a wife, put the effort into understanding her. Is it an impossible task? Most assuredly. But sometimes the challenging jobs are the most rewarding. Wives need men who engage and participate, not abdicate as parent and spouse. For too many husbands the lights are on, but nobody is home.

This is certainly true with Elkanah, which is not surprising when you consider the serious problems that naturally arise from polygamy. This situation certainly adds to Elkanah’s inability to understand or meet his wife’s needs. Simply stated, he had too many wives!

Let’s take a look at where polygamy first crawled into history. Genesis 4:19 tells us: “Lamech married two women, one named Adah and the other Zillah.” Lamech disobeyed God’s very specific directive in Genesis 2:24: “A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” Tough assignment becoming one flesh when three or more get involved.

We need to nail solidly into our lives two important precepts that come from these Scriptures. First, prevalence does not equal acceptance. Just because polygamy became a common practice, God did not change the rules. Polygamy did not become acceptable with God because it became common with man, any more than research polls cause Him to change His mind about any other sin. Our God is incredibly “public opinion resistant.”

Second, *a man cannot be one flesh with two women*. Nor can a woman be one flesh with two men. According to God’s math, only two can become one. Both of Elkanah’s wives suffered because of his disobedience to God.

As we have all discovered in our individual lives, one problem unchecked invariably leads to plenty of others. “Year after year” the mother of Elkanah’s children baited Hannah, and “year after year” the woman of Elkanah’s heart bit the bait. Small wonder Hannah felt “bitterness of soul” (1 Sam. 1:10).

DAY 5

1 Samuel 1:9–18

Deeply hurt, Hannah prayed to the LORD and wept with many tears. . . . Then Hannah went on her way; she ate and no longer appeared downcast (vv. 10, 18).

What constitutes the most bitter pill you've ever had to swallow? All of us have them. Compared to each other they may seem major or minor, but just as the only minor surgery is one that happens to someone else, the bitterness we feel is never minor.

Hannah's situation certainly involved no small pain. Childless. Tormented. Alone. A plight many have faced, but company proves small solace for misery.

Yet Hannah made the right choices about what to do with her bitterness. She "wept much and prayed to the LORD" (v. 10). In her prayer, she made two almost unimaginable commitments. One was by far the easiest of the pair. She promised no razor would be used on his head. This meant the child would be a Nazirite, especially consecrated to the Lord. The other promise was to give him to the Lord for all the days of his life.

We could accuse her of bargaining with God, who does not bargain, but our God does search the earth for those with a heart toward Him so He can bless them (2 Chron. 16:9). Chronicles had not yet been written when Hannah was praying for a son, but somehow she sought in God what David later learned to be true: "The LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts. If you seek him, he will be found by you" (1 Chron. 28:9). In her bitterness she sought her Lord.

I believe God responded to Hannah's prayer for two reasons. First, *He is gracious*. He longs to pour His love on us. Second, *He knew her heart*. He knew that what she said, she would do.

Hannah demonstrated that she took her vow to God seriously. For three years she would hold and love this child. Then she would fulfill her vow, loving her son even as she gave him to the One who gave him to her.

I never fail to be moved by this account in Scripture. How deeply this woman wanted a child. How easy to promise anything to get what we want, but Hannah did not voice empty words. Even in her bitterness of soul and great weeping, she made her vow to God with the steadfast determination to fulfill it.



DAY 6

1 Samuel 1:19–28

“I prayed for this boy, and since the LORD gave me what I asked Him for, I now give the boy to the LORD. For as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD” (vv. 27–28a).

Hannah named him Samuel. So precious. So prayed for. So deeply loved. And so very important to the Hebrew nation. “She named him Samuel, saying, ‘Because I asked the LORD for him’” (1 Sam. 1:20).

Hannah vowed to the Lord that she would give the son she asked for to the Lord and that the child would be a Nazirite. Can you imagine how much easier it would be to say those words about a hypothetical baby, before you held the child in your arms—before your heart became so wrapped up in his that you could hardly keep them separate? Imagine the emotion that filled Hannah’s heart. Elkanah went up to make the annual sacrifice. Hannah did not go along, but she told him, “After the boy is weaned, I will take him and present him before the LORD, and he will live there always” (v. 22).

And that’s just what she did.

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 at Shiloh (1 Sam. 1:24).

Hebrew mothers, according to the accounts recorded in the Apocrypha (2 Mac. 7:27), customarily nursed their children until they were about three years old. I cannot imagine a more difficult age to tear myself away from a child. Still young enough to be such a baby! Old enough to question why. I cried the first time I let mine go to Mother’s Day Out for half a day!

If Hannah mustered up the strength to take him there, you would never expect that she could walk away and leave him. In fact, these days we would question such a mother’s love for her child.

Oh, but God had a plan. A marvelous plan. He allowed Hannah to be childless so that she would petition God for a child instead of assuming it would be the normal result of marital relations. He also allowed Hannah to be deeply desirous of a child so she would dedicate him entirely to the Lord. He sovereignly planned for His word to come through Eli at the temple so that she would return him to the exact place where she made the vow. Why? Because God had a plan for Samuel that was far more significant than even the most loving set of parents could devise.

Surely while nursing him, Hannah looked into the face of her precious son, and with love overflowing, rehearsed the faithfulness of God in his tiny ears. No doubt he was weaned to know he was appointed to grow up in the house of the Lord. What did the child do when she took him there? “He worshiped the LORD” (v. 28). The Hebrew word is *shachab*. The *Complete Word Study Old Testament* tells us that “*shachab* was not used in the general sense of worship, but specifically to bow down, to prostrate oneself as an act of respect before a superior being.”⁶

I recall a scene, engraved in many of our memories, of a tiny boy stepping forward from his grieving mother, saluting the flag-draped coffin of a man who was not only his daddy but the President of the United States. Imagine another scene: A tiny three-year-old boy, still with creases of satiny baby skin around his plump little thighs, bending his knee and bowing before El Elyon, the sovereign God of all creation. How precious this child must have been to God. How in the world could a child that age have such respect for the God of the universe? We get a clue from Hannah’s prayer of praise, found in 1 Samuel 2:1–10 . . .

“There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God” (v. 2).

Samuel learned faith from his mother—a woman whose faithfulness evidenced her faith, a woman with compulsory praise on her lips. She met painful sacrifice with a song.

God does not ask of us that we take our children to the temple and leave them there to be reared by priests, but we must give them to God in other, equally important ways.

Remember the faith of Hannah. She sought God in her deep need. She made a vow that, by its very nature, was either a deep commitment or a hollow mockery. Then she fulfilled her vow with a mother’s sacrifice.



DAY 7

1 Samuel 2:12–26

Eli's sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the LORD. . . .

By contrast, the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the LORD and with men (vv. 12, 26).

Eli was the priest in charge of the tabernacle at Shiloh. At the time of our story, he was an old man. His two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, had followed him as priests in charge. Worshipers came to Shiloh from all the tribes of Israel, bringing with them offerings. We read that “Eli’s sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the LORD” (v. 12). They abused worshipers, flaunted the sacrificial laws and customs, and even committed adultery with the women who served at the tabernacle.

At first look, the situation with Eli, his sons, and Samuel seems unfathomable. As credentials for effective parenting, Eli’s sons would get him expelled from any waiting list for adoptive parents. Why would God entrust Samuel to a man who had two such sons? One friend of mine observed that Eli demonstrated God’s willingness to recommitment us. No matter how badly we’ve messed up in the past, God can still use us. What an expression of His grace to Eli, to give him another chance at fathering!

As we see the unbending character of the man that Samuel became, remember the influences that shaped his life. Possibly he chose to learn from the negative example of Hophni and Phinehas. Most certainly he learned from his mother’s respect for God and her commitment to obedience. From Samuel’s example we can conclude at least the following truths:

- *We cannot use even the worst of our leaders’ failures as excuses before God for lives of negligence and compromise.* Knowing what we do about Eli’s sons, we are not surprised to learn that “the word of the LORD was rare” in their days (1 Sam. 3:1). They did not hear from God because they did not honor God. God did not speak because they did not listen. Yet despite the example of Eli’s sons, Samuel chose a life of unparalleled faithfulness to God.

- *Parents, like Hannah, do a tremendous service to their children when they rear them to worship and adore God and God alone.* Hannah could not train Samuel to depend on her because she knew she wouldn’t be there. But as we witness his life, we never see Samuel confuse God and man. His mother’s influence still came through.



DAY 8

1 Samuel 4:1–11

When the ark of the covenant of the LORD entered the camp,
all the Israelites raised such a loud shout that the ground shook (v. 5).

I have noticed something specific to religious people who do not walk with God. They cannot tell the difference between legitimate faith and superstition. This was certainly true of Israel throughout much of the period of the judges. Finding themselves under the heel of the Philistines—a neighboring, but not neighborly, country—they had gone out to fight against them. But the Israelites met bitter defeat. About four thousand soldiers lost their lives in the battle.

Yet as a people who had rejected and ignored God for a generation, their first question upon being slaughtered by their enemy was, “Why did the LORD bring defeat upon us today?” (v. 3). That’s when the leaders sent for the ark of the covenant. No doubt their thinking ran that their ancestors had carried the ark when God won great victories, so if they had the ark, they would be victorious.

We can take a great lesson from their presumption. The sovereign God loves deeply, but He will not be disrespected. He will not permit us to take Him for granted. He will not honor our neglect.

Genuinely spiritual people recognize that the trappings of God’s presence—such as church buildings, human organizations, even the sacred ark—have no meaning apart from Him. Those who honor Him will *respect* the symbols of His presence, but they will not *worship* those symbols. They certainly will not allow them to take His place.


According to the 1 Samuel account, the very ones who despised and disrespected the sacred things of God, Hophni and Phinehas, came with the ark. No way under heaven was God going to give them this victory. They were treating the ark of the covenant as a good-luck charm. The ark had no power to save. Only the God who graced the ark with His presence had that power.

Likewise, the cross has no power to save—only the Christ who graced it with His presence. We must be very cautious to avoid ever approaching the Divine as a talisman.




DAY 9

1 Samuel 6:1–12

——

“Take the ark of the LORD, place it on the cart, and put the gold objects in a box beside it, which you’re sending Him as a guilt offering. Send it off and let it go its way” (v. 8).

——

David’s back story continues through 1 Samuel 5 and 6, where the Philistines capture the ark of the covenant but are frightened when, in a classic show of “my god’s bigger than your god,” the presence of the Lord caused the Philistine god Dagon to fall facedown before the ark in a position of worship.

But God wasn’t through showin’ He’s God. So He sent a plague on the Philistines in Ashdod.

They moved the ark to Gath. God moved the plague to Gath.

To Ekron. To Ekron.

You get the picture?

Finally the Philistines cried “uncle.” They included an offering to the God of the Hebrews and sent the ark back to Israel . . . sort of.

Any farmer would recognize that the Philistines tried to rig the return of the ark. They put the ark on a cart pulled by two cows that had never pulled a cart, cows with nursing calves penned up at home, and sent the cows on their way with the ark. The Philistine leaders obviously did everything they could to keep the cows from taking the ark away.

Have you ever wanted a certain answer from God so desperately that you consciously or subconsciously tried to “rig” the results? Reading things into the answer that just weren’t there? Grabbing the first thing out of someone’s mouth as your answer? I think we all have. It’s easy to do, but it invariably leads to pain because we end up claiming a promise or a position God never gave us.


Obviously, the cows wouldn’t pull the cart together, and certainly they wouldn’t leave their calves. Certainly, that is, except for God. The cows obeyed the Creator of cows.


I guess this story proves another basic truth about life: *sin makes you stupid*. The cows had better sense than the Philistines. God can appoint even the beasts of the field to do His bidding.



DAY 10

1 Samuel 8:1–22

——
Listen to them, but you must solemnly warn them and tell them
about the rights of the king who will rule over them (v. 9).

——
Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. Then, when he grew old, he appointed his two sons to serve in his place. But like Eli before him, his sons dishonored the Lord. We don't know what went wrong. What we do know is that the people demanded a king.

I believe this request from the people devastated Samuel. *Hadn't he loved and sacrificially served these people?*

Then, in a move that seemed to justify and reward their misplaced values and shortsightedness, the Lord told him to grant their request because they had not rejected Samuel as judge; they had rejected God as king.

As always, Samuel obeyed.

Still, he told the people of the taxes they would pay, the freedoms they would lose, and ultimately how their sons and daughters would be reduced to virtual slavery by the fulfillment of their request. No matter how Samuel reasoned, however, the people wanted a king. They wanted a king for all the wrong reasons. Ultimately, they wanted a king because the other nations had them.

We can see so many truths in the situation. One lesson speaks of *patience*. God had already planned a king for the people. Their lack of patience was to cost them dearly. If they had waited for the Lord's choice instead of demanding their way, how different might the story have been?

Another lesson from the story deals with *rejection*. None of us enjoys rejection, but when we are serving Christ, any rejection falls to His broad shoulders rather than our narrow ones. The next time you feel rejection's sting, remember God's words to Samuel: "It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me" (v. 7).

Samuel warned the Israelites about what they were getting into. Often when God does not readily give us what we want, it is because He knows what our desire would cost us. Faith sometimes means forgoing our desires because we trust Christ to have a better plan for our lives.



DAY 11

1 Samuel 9:14b–25

Then Samuel said, “Notice that the reserved piece is set before you. Eat it because it was saved for you for this solemn event at the time I said, ‘I’ve invited the people.’” So Saul ate with Samuel that day (v. 24).

The people rejected the sons of Samuel and demanded a king. Because they did, we meet one of the great and tragic figures of the Bible. He stood a head taller than anyone else in Israel yet showed all the characteristics of a poor self-concept. His name was Saul, and he would be king. We learn volumes about the shepherd king, David, from his peculiar relationship with his predecessor, Saul.

God arranged for Saul to encounter Samuel while Saul and a servant were out searching for lost donkeys. God had already told Samuel that Saul was coming. But Saul got a puzzled understanding of Samuel’s statement:

“As for the donkeys you lost three days ago, do not worry about them; they have been found. And to whom is all the desire of Israel turned, if not to you and all your father’s family?” (1 Sam. 9:20).

Saul’s response gives us a glimpse of a root problem in his life. The future king replied, “But am I not a Benjamite, from the smallest tribe of Israel, and is not my clan the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin?” (v. 21).

How do we distinguish between godly humility and low self-esteem? Which did Saul display? One key lies in our focus. A person with godly humility looks to the Master. He or she neither exalts nor denigrates self, because to do either is to make self the center of our universe. When we’re really serving Christ, our reputations and abilities simply cease to be so important. We must decrease that He may increase.

Saul exhibited the core sin of all self-centered people: he focused on himself. We need to recognize that a lack of confidence does not equal humility. In fact, genuinely humble people have enormous confidence because it rests in a great God. Saul’s self-centeredness eventually cost him dearly, as a self-focus always does.



DAY 12

1 Samuel 10:17–27

Some wicked men said, “How can this guy save us?”
They despised him and did not bring a gift, but Saul said nothing (v. 27).

Samuel summoned all of Israel and led them through a dramatic selection process to reveal their king. Only two people knew the eventual outcome: Samuel and Saul. From all the tribes, Samuel selected Benjamin. From all the clans of Benjamin, he chose Matri. From all the families of Matri, the family of Kish. When the big moment arrived—no Saul.

Again we get a glimpse of Saul’s root problem: Saul was hiding among the baggage. Self-consciousness constitutes the opposite of God-consciousness. Rather than gratefully rejoicing in the privilege God was freely extending to him, Saul’s concern ran to himself and what others would think of him.

Once messengers had retrieved Saul from hiding, Samuel presented the new king and explained to the people the regulations of their new form of government. That’s when we immediately get another hint of Saul’s deficiency. Most of the people shouted for joy at the stature of the new king, but a few troublemakers reacted differently. They despised Saul and publicly insulted him. Another characteristic of Saul’s self-consciousness appeared: he kept silent. Possibly he wanted everybody to like him. Another Saul wrote a prescription this one could have used:

Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ (Gal. 1:10).

Saul, like all people pleasers, had difficulty standing up for right or righteousness because he desired the approval of men. Instead of confrontation, he looked for the easy way out. Saul didn’t deal with the problem before him; maybe he hoped it would go away. However, the greater problem lay in himself: he prioritized self over the God who had chosen him.

We are about to see Saul at his best, but like a mighty oak with a fatal infestation of insects, his blight would continue to eat away at his soul. We soon see quite a different portrait of the man who might have been a great king had he consistently placed himself under the authority of God.

Saul returned to his father’s farm. Events didn’t leave him there long. Nahash the Ammonite attacked Jabesh Gilead, a city of Israel about twenty-five miles south of the Sea of Galilee. The leaders knew they could not hold out against his superior force, so they began to bargain. Nahash agreed to let them

live, but at an awful price. He said, “I will make a treaty with you only on the condition that I gouge out the right eye of every one of you and so bring disgrace on all Israel” (1 Sam. 11:2). The people agreed on the condition that they have one week for their fellow Israelites to come to their rescue.

What happened next revealed some important things about the new king. The messenger from Jabesh Gilead found Saul returning with his oxen after plowing a field. I am encouraged that Saul was touched by the tears of “his” people. Scripture tells us that “the Spirit of God came upon him in power, and he burned with anger” (1 Sam. 11:6). The Israelites were about to receive a “special delivery” from their new king.

Saul took a pair of oxen, cut them to pieces, and sent the pieces throughout Israel, proclaiming, “This is what will be done to the oxen of anyone who does not follow Saul and Samuel” (1 Sam. 11:7). Samuel had warned the people that a king would mean forced servitude. Hello selective service!


His approach worked. Verse 7 ends, “Then the terror of the LORD fell on the people, and they turned out as one man.” Saul marched his army to Jabesh Gilead and relieved the siege. In the process he won two mighty victories: one over the Ammonites and one over his detractors. The victorious Israelites gathered those who had slighted Saul and . . .

The people then said to Samuel, “Who was it that asked, ‘Shall Saul reign over us?’ Bring these men to us and we will put them to death.” But Saul said, “No one shall be put to death today, for this day the LORD has rescued Israel” (1 Sam. 11:12–13).


For Saul’s sake I wish I could report that Saul was simply a compassionate king, but something else may have been going on. If indeed he felt compassion, in the days ahead we will see him lose it. Rather, his actions seem to be the cry of a people pleaser, desiring to be liked rather than demanding to be respected.

DAY 13

1 Samuel 13:6–14

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“You have not kept the command which the LORD your God gave you. It was at this time that the LORD would have permanently established your reign over Israel” (v. 13).

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Any serious student of Israel, or of David, must face why God rejected Saul as king of Israel. We begin to comprehend the reason by examining the time when Saul mustered an army for war against the Philistines, but the Israelite army was so badly outnumbered that they hid in caves.

God gave Saul a chance to shine. He could have taken his place among the great men and women of faith. According to verse 8, he “waited seven days, the time set by Samuel.” God was teaching his new king to wait on the Lord.

Imagine the strain on the fledgling king as he watched his army melt away before his eyes. The prophet told Saul to wait until he came to offer the sacrifice before battle. By the seventh day, Saul’s patience snapped. He could no longer stand to see his army disintegrate. No doubt he chafed under the criticism of his men. He dared not go into battle without making an offering to God, so he offered the sacrifice himself.

Have you noticed the truth in the old statement that God is seldom in a hurry but He’s never late? How often do we give up on God and on obedience just five minutes before deliverance? As Saul made the offering, Samuel arrived. At first glance Saul’s infraction may seem minor and Samuel’s reaction harsh, but we must remember, Saul was king of God’s people. If you aspire to greater authority, you must accept the greater accountability that goes with it.

Samuel demanded to know what Saul had done. The king’s response reflected his fear of public opinion, his lack of trust in God, and his cavalier attitude toward obedience. Saul said when he saw the men scattering and Samuel didn’t come, he “felt compelled to offer the burnt offering” (v. 12).

We dare not minimize disobedience to God. The prophet responded to Saul’s excuses and blaming with harsh words. Saul had a clear command from God. He disobeyed, and it cost him the kingdom.



DAY 14

1 Samuel 14:1–14

Saul's son Jonathan said to the attendant who carried his weapons,
 "Come on, let's cross over to the Philistine garrison on the other side."
 However, he did not tell his father (v. 1).

Saul, a man with such potential, squandered the kingdom through his disobedience. Now we meet a character who was as noble as Saul was disappointing—Jonathan, son of King Saul, a man vastly different from his father. The one who became so dear to David is sure to become dear to us.

Once again Saul, Jonathan, and the Israelite army faced a far superior force of Philistines. The Israelites were literally hiding in fear. Jonathan obviously decided the army of the mighty God need not hide.

In one of the great statements of faith backed by action, Jonathan said to his armor-bearer:

*"Come, let's go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised fellows.
 Perhaps the LORD will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the
 Lord from saving, whether by many or by few" (1 Sam. 14:6).*

They challenged the Philistine detachment holding the pass at Micmash. God showed them they should attack. So the two climbed up to the soldiers, killed twenty men, and began the battle. Before the day ended, the Israelites won a great victory over the Philistines.

Jonathan and his armor-bearer were impressive and worthy men. I am amazed by them in two ways. First, Jonathan's perception of the Lord's ways impresses me. His keen perception of the Lord certainly did not come from his father, because Jonathan's understanding exceeded that of Saul. Second, Jonathan had his own relationship with the Lord, completely separate from his father's. He made two profound statements in verse 6:

1. "Perhaps the LORD will act in our behalf."
2. "Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few."

Consider how these statements reveal Jonathan's distinct perception of God's ways: Jonathan knew the Lord could save, no matter who or how many were fighting the battle. In fact, he knew that if God chose to save, nothing could hinder Him! His faith in God's strength and determination stood solidly; God could do anything. Jonathan's only question was whether God would choose to do it through them that day. Whether or not He did, Jonathan understood God's response to be based on sovereignty, not weakness.

Jonathan began the battle that quickly turned into a rout. God sent panic on the Philistines until they killed one another. The Israelites merely chased the Philistines in a mopping-up operation.

Then Jonathan's father, the king, entered the picture. Saul saw the Philistine army in disarray and ordered the Israelites into battle. In the process he did an impulsive and stupid thing. Saul "bound the people under an oath, saying, 'Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies!'" (1 Sam. 14:24). He forced the army into an ill-advised and non-God-directed fast.

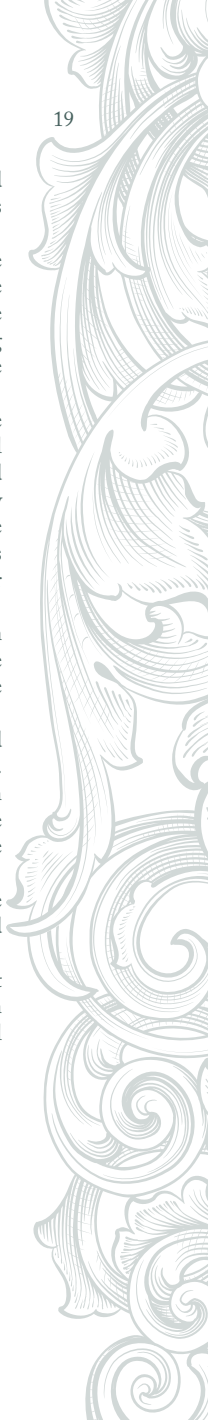
I believe we need to take a lesson in two ways from Saul's impulsive action. First, *we simply need to beware of decisions made on impulse*. Saul displayed an excessive capacity for action without consulting either God or good sense. The second lesson from Saul's action relates specifically to our eating habits. Many people indulge in fasting that does not come from God. Some carry dieting to fatal extremes. I have known friends who have died as a result of depriving their bodies of food. Remember from Saul's impulsive command: *only God has the right to call a fast*.

Hasty self-centered vows can cost us. Since Jonathan was not in the camp, he did not hear his father's command. As the army chased the Philistines, they became exhausted. They came to a place where a beehive had been broken open. Jonathan ate some of the honey.

In this story we encounter an amazing and humbling truth: God expected the people to obey the king even when his edicts made no sense. So the next day when they inquired of God, He remained silent. Through a process of elimination, they discovered that Jonathan had disobeyed the command of Saul. The king would have put his own son to death, but the men would not allow it.

God tried to teach Saul a very serious lesson that day. Saul's pride could have caused him to keep a foolish vow. Better to repent than to add foolishness to foolishness.

In the account of the battle and its aftermath, we see evidence that God is for us, not against us. He wants us fortified before our enemy with faith like Jonathan's, obedience like the armor-bearer's, and proper fuel like Saul's army should have received.



DAY 15

1 Samuel 15:12–29

“Does the LORD take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? Look: to obey is better than sacrifice” (v. 22).

God commanded Saul to utterly destroy the Amalekites, including all the people and all the livestock. God is sovereign. He owes us no explanation as to why He desired for this entire population to be exterminated. However, we can assume they were a vile and godless people, because God is merciful and compassionate.

We do know from Deuteronomy 25:17–19 that the Amalekites had once attacked Israel when they were traveling from Egypt to the Promised Land. They had followed the Israelites and attacked the stragglers. But whatever the reasons God had for ordering the destruction of the Amalekites, Saul led the Israelite army to victory but then disobeyed. They kept the king and the best of the livestock.

Have you noticed how a small disobedience left unchecked always grows? Saul’s actions back in chapter 13 grew from fear and concern for public opinion. In chapter 15, however, he had *nothing* to fear; his disobedience had become open and self-serving.

When God told Samuel what Saul had done, the prophet cried out all night in grief. Then he proceeded to confront Saul directly. The confrontation speaks to us as we consider our approach to God’s instructions. When God speaks, we must learn to follow Him with complete obedience.

Saul made some very serious presumptions. He kept King Agag alive to present him as a trophy—a public exhibit. He did not slaughter the sheep and cattle for the very same reason: he saved the best to make himself look better. Verse 9 ends with a sad commentary on Saul’s actions:

These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed.

Saul had the audacity to improve on God’s command. Several breaches in Saul’s character become evident in this dramatic chapter.

First, Saul was *arrogant*. Remember that we said he was self-centered? If we needed any further proof of Saul’s pride and audacity, verse 12 certainly provides it. Saul went directly to Carmel and built a monument to himself.

Next, note how Saul refused to take *responsibility for his actions*. He first excused himself for disobeying God by claiming he spared the best of the sheep and cattle for a sacrifice to the Lord. Amazing, isn’t it? Believe it or not, we can

sometimes use God as our excuse for disobedience too. One woman told me she was certain God's will was for her to leave her husband because she simply wasn't happy. Another woman explained to me that she had found the man God intended her to marry, though she was already married.

Saul not only tried to use God as his excuse for disobedience; he also claimed he was afraid of, and gave in to, the people (v. 24). When we've done something wrong or foolish, we find shouldering the responsibility difficult, don't we? At times we are all tempted to blame someone else when we've blown it. I wonder if the outcome might have been different if Saul simply had admitted that he made a wrong choice.

Saul minimized the seriousness of disobedience. In verse 23, Samuel made a striking statement. He said, "Rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry."

The comparison seems puzzling until we consider that rebellion is a means by which we attempt to set the course of our futures. We try to choose our own futures by our independent actions. Divination attempts to foretell or sway the future. In the same verse, God likens arrogance to the evil of idolatry. When we are arrogant, who becomes God in our lives?

We see the final stage of Saul's disobedience and disintegration later on in chapter 28. Once again he had to go into battle. By this time Samuel was dead. Saul sought without success to contact God. Since the Lord chose to remain silent, Saul, in an attempt to contact Samuel, consulted a medium known as the witch of Endor. We see the fleshing out of Samuel's earlier statement. Saul's rebellion became literal witchcraft.

How does a man who is the people's choice lose a kingdom? Saul provides a sad object lesson. All his life he focused on himself instead of his God. Therefore, he feared public opinion; he would not trust God but rather had to feel he was in control. He disobeyed, because obedience requires the trust and humility he did not possess.

Saul. The first king of Israel. The people's choice. Not an accident waiting for a place to happen but a train wreck mangling the lives of others. Sad but true. A head taller but a heart shorter.

