

Truths in Transition

April 9 — 1 Samuel 1:9-4:11

Day 99 — 266 Days to Go

Today In Your Reading...

As the period of judges comes to an end, we would expect to see a transitional period, in which God closes one chapter and begins another. That transition occurred in the life of Samuel (3:11), the last judge and the prophet whom God used to ordain the first kings. While we don't have extended details of his early years, we are allowed to see several snap shots.

First, we learn of Samuel's mother, Hannah, who faithfully prayed for him before and after he was born and who dedicated him to the Lord's service. Second, we see that the immorality of that period reached even into the priestly family, as Hophni and Phinehas disdained God's laws and sanctuary. We also see that Eli the High Priest didn't do anything about it. A stark contrast exists here regarding parenting. While Eli honored his sons above the Lord (not disciplining them for sinning against the Lord), *Hannah honored the Lord above her son.* **While children are important, a parent's love for them should never eclipse his or her love for and obedience to God and His Word.**

Finally, we get a glimpse of Samuel's prophetic call, as he delivers the terrible news that God's judgment is about to befall the priesthood and the nation. The Israelites lose a great battle to the Philistines, the priests Hophni and Phinehas are slain, and the Ark of the Covenant is taken. It is the darkest day in the nation's history, the culmination of its unfaithfulness and apostasy.

While the pictures of Christ are not as obvious here as in other places, they are present nonetheless. In Hannah's wonderful prayer, she hinted at the Lord's "coming King, the anointed one whom He will exalt" (2:10). A mysterious man of God appeared and told Eli that God would raise up a faithful priest, "whose house would endure forever" (2:35). Finally, Samuel himself

was a type of Christ, given to a godly woman, dedicated to the Lord from birth, who spends a great deal of time in the house of God, grows in favor with God and men (2:26; Luke 2:52), and is the spiritual leader of the people.

Daily Reflection

What I found most encouraging today is that, despite the terrible state of Israel, God was still working. Even though "in those days, messages from the Lord were very rare and visions were quite uncommon" (3:1), they still occurred. God had not aborted His plans nor abandoned His people. Although He was very upset, the Lord was still behind the scenes orchestrating events, fulfilling His purposes.

What encouragement can you find here for your own life or for our nation?

I must admit that there are times when I think that our nation is on the edge of the abyss, that God's wrath is about to be poured out because of our unfaithfulness and immorality. However, **I am often reminded that our national apostasy does not thwart His purposes.** Furthermore, while our land is full of people like Hophni and Phinehas, those who despise His statutes, and even people like Eli, who claim to be on God's side but who don't honor Him with their deeds, I'm grateful that there are Samuels here and there who remain faithful to the Lord. **Which one are you — Hophni, Phinehas, Eli, or Samuel?** "The Lord will protect His godly ones, but the wicked will perish in darkness."

God on Display

April 10 — 1 Samuel 4:12-8:9

Today In Your Reading...

Wow, what a day! So much happened that it's a bit overwhelming. The Israelites were defeated by the Philistines, the priests Hophni and Phinehas were killed, and the Ark of the Covenant was taken. When Eli the High Priest heard these things, he fell off of his seat and died.

It was the lowest point in the history of God's people. His presence, His power, and His glory, which were all symbolized in the Ark of the Covenant, and which had been in their midst for centuries, had departed. Phinehas' wife understood the solemnity of the occasion; she named her son Ichabod — "Israel's glory is gone!"

All of these things had happened, of course, because the people of Israel had rebelled against the Lord and abandoned their covenant. They were worshipping idols, neglecting God's laws, and doing what was right in their own eyes. Thus, **God would not honor a people who did not honor Him.**

When the Philistines got their hands on the Ark of the Covenant, they were ecstatic. It was a sign that their god Dagon had defeated the God of Israel. In fact, they treated the Ark like a trophy and placed it in the temple of Dagon. However, they soon found out that **the Lord is not a trophy to put on display. He is the one true God, who alone is worthy to be worshiped and obeyed.** His power frightened the Philistines and they quickly sent the Ark back.

In the absence of the Ark of the Covenant (twenty years), "all Israel mourned because the Lord had abandoned them" (7:2). Even with the rise of Samuel, the godly judge, a terrible transition occurred. The people began clamoring for a king. Rather than return to the Lord, obey His statutes, honor their covenant, and live in liberty, they believed that the solution to their prob-

lems was "to be like the other nations" and to enthrone a human ruler. Though Samuel pleaded with the people, the Lord told him to give them what they wanted. "It is Me they are rejecting," He said, "not you. They don't want Me to be their King any longer" (8:7).

Daily Reflection

The Israelites had missed the point of it all — instead of being God's ambassadors, set apart to reflect His glory and power to surrounding nations, *they rejected Him to be like everyone else around them.* **They were God-followers in name only**, treating Him like a trophy instead of submitting to Him as their Lord.

What does it mean that they or the Philistines treated God like a trophy? Are you guilty of treating the Lord this way?

When God chose the people of Israel, He did so that they might display His glory and goodness to those around them. Instead, they rejected this role as His ambassadors and wanted to blend in and be like the nations around them. The Lord was simply Someone they turned to when it was an emergency; the rest of the time, they did what they wanted. *God is not a trophy to display in order to make you look good; rather He is One to obey.* He is not to be paraded around when it is convenient for you, but your agenda, your priorities, and your decisions are to revolve around Him. **Is God on display for you, or are you on display for God?**

The People's Choice

Today In Your Reading...

Samuel the prophet anointed Saul the first king of Israel, and, just like that, the Period of Judges ended and the United Kingdom or era of monarchy began. Of course, it was not quite that easy. The people weren't sure if Saul was the right man for the job, until he led the army against the Ammonites and won a great victory. At that point, no one questioned his authority. They were ready to follow him no matter what.

Choosing a human king was a sin against God's rule, for He was already King (12:12). After all that He had done for the people of Israel, to deliver them from bondage and from the hands of their enemies, to provide and protect them all these years, they rejected His reign, demanded He abdicate from His throne, and called for someone else to lead them. In essence, this ungrateful request was paramount to overthrowing the government; the people demanded that God be replaced with a ruler of their choosing.

All sins have consequences, and this sin, of rejecting God's perfect rule to follow a fallen imperfect human ruler would have tremendous consequences. As the last judge and spiritual leader of the nation, Samuel rebuked them for their decision and unfaithfulness. "Have I ever cheated you?" he asked. "Have I ever oppressed you or taken a bribe? Tell me and I will right whatever wrong I've done" (12:3). Though it was Samuel asking these questions, he was doing so on behalf of the Lord. God's leadership of the people had been flawless. The people were never treated unfairly; there was liberty, justice, and prosperity with Him on the throne.

The people acknowledged God's sinless reign. Then Samuel reminded them "all of the great things that the Lord had done for them" (12:7). Samuel also warned them against a king's abuses (8:10-22). Human rulers tend to enrich

themselves at the people's expense and, in time, enslave them to do their bidding. *Oppression is the norm for human governments; the fallen nature of men cannot wield power without exercising it corruptly.* Despite all the baggage that comes with a human king, it was the people's choice "to be like all the nations," so God gave them what they wanted.

Daily Reflection

It is so easy to judge others for their terrible decisions, when it seems so obvious to us that they are making a mistake. But, have you ever rejected God's best to follow after your own desires? Sure you have, probably many times.

Why do you think that is? Why do you demand your way, when His way is so much better?

Unfortunately, there are times when God gives you what you ask for. Why would He do that?

When you get what you ask for, there is no room for complaining. **You must live with the consequences.** The people of Israel asked for a king and got one. We will see how that choice haunts them for generations to come.

Waiting on the Lord

Today In Your Reading...

Saul "secured his grasp on Israel's throne by fighting against his enemies in every direction... and wherever he turned, he was victorious. He did great deeds... saving Israel from all those who had plundered them" (14:47, 48).

Saul's military exploits and bold leadership on the battlefield were well-known throughout the land, and they helped to establish his reign over the people. However, it became apparent that King Saul was flawed in his leadership, for he made several costly mistakes, even openly sinning against the Lord.

First, Saul sacrificed the burnt offering himself, which was a major violation of the ceremonial laws. Only the Levitical priests were given that authority. Sacrifices were not part of the king's duties. We see here our first glimpse at a divine separation between the civil and the sacred spheres. Today we might call it *the separation of Church and State*. While God instituted both spheres, they each have their own responsibilities, and *neither is to rule over the other*. For *this sin*, Saul's descendants would not reign over Israel. The throne would be given to another one, "a man after God's own heart."

Second, in the midst of battle, Saul made a foolish oath, forcing his men not to eat anything until the enemy had been defeated. His decision had three harmful consequences. It hurt his men in that they had no nourishment; after fighting all day, they grew tired and weak and were, therefore, at a disadvantage. The oath also hurt his son, unknowingly; Jonathan, who did not know about the oath, ate some honey, and, thus, was placed under a curse and would die (though not today). Finally, once the King's oath was fulfilled, the men were so hungry that when they killed cattle to eat, they did not take the time to cook the meat; instead, they ate the

meat raw (with the blood in it), which was in violation of the Mosaic law.

Daily Reflection

When Samuel confronted Saul about his sin, the King replied, "I saw my men scattering from me, and you didn't arrive when you said you would, and the Philistines were ready for battle! So I said, 'The Philistines are ready to march against me and I haven't even asked for the Lord's help!' So I felt obliged to offer the burnt offering myself" (13:11, 12).

Can you determine the catalyst for Saul's sin? What did he exhibit or lack in his decision?

The key words in Saul's statement to Samuel, who represented the Lord's presence, was "I saw," "myself," and "before you came." When Saul assessed the chaotic situation, he felt the overwhelming pressure to do something immediately. Though he was supposed to wait on Samuel, wait on the Lord, **Saul grew impatient, took matters into his own hands, and acted without God's guidance or blessing.**

Have you ever acted in this way? Have you ever given into the "need" to take immediate action, to run ahead of God and act on your own? In truth, **impatience is a selfish quality, one that exhibits a lack of faith in God and leads you to act in His place.** *Waiting on the Lord is one of the most difficult activities, because it denies your sinful selfish pride the opportunity to dethrone God and act in His stead.*

What Is More Pleasing?

April 13 — 1 Samuel 15:1-17:31

Day 103 — 262 Days to Go

Today In Your Reading...

The Lord gave King Saul a chance to redeem himself by obeying a direct order — to destroy the Amalekites. However, Saul had forgotten his humble beginning and the Lord who had established his throne. He outright defied the Lord's command and did things his own way.

Once rulers taste the sweetness of power, they often lose sight of its source. It is God who raises up kings. He is sovereign over all earthly thrones; and, *anyone who has delegated authority is accountable to the one who loaned it.* Thus, **all rulers must answer to God for their stewardship of His authority.** Even kings, dictators, and Presidents must set God's law above their own or pay for their arrogance.

Saul did not carry out the Lord's assignment, and he even went so far as to claim credit for the victory by building a monument to himself (15:12). When Samuel confronted him about these things, Saul dodged responsibility and made excuses for his actions. He failed in this point — **he sought to please himself** (1 Sam. 15:12) **or to please the people** (15:24), **instead of pleasing the Lord** (v.24). He did not take obeying God seriously but only reverted to obedience, or repented of his disobedience, when his own way did not work or when it made him look good (v.30).

As a result, God rejected Saul as being Israel's King. He would give his throne to another "better than him" (15:28). Thus, the Lord sent Samuel to anoint David, son of Jesse, as the next King of Israel, even while Saul was still on the throne. While Saul was the people's choice for king, exhibiting all of the external qualities, God's choice of a king is based on admirable internal qualities. As the Lord told Samuel, "People judge by outward appearance, but the Lord looks at a person's thoughts and inten-

tions" (16:7). In other words, David was chosen king because he had a heart for the Lord, a true desire to please Him instead of himself.

Daily Reflection

Before we move on to follow David's meteoric rise to fame, let's focus on the obvious lesson for today — *obedience*. Samuel said these cutting words to Saul, "What is more pleasing to the Lord, your offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to His voice? **Obedience is far better than sacrifice!** Listening to Him is much better than offering" to Him (15:22, 23).

Summarize Samuel's statement in your words.

Do you love the Lord? Then *obey the Lord*. Do you want to please Him? Then *do what He says*. Do you desire to serve God? Then *follow God*. Like Saul, **what you say matters little if you do not carry out His commandments. What you intend is second to what you do.**

Also, your obedience not only includes what you do, but when you do it, how you do it, and why you do it. What do you do? All that God asks of you. When? Without delay! *Delayed obedience is disobedience*. How? To the fullest! *Partial obedience is disobedience*. Do not obey God as you see fit, but obey God as He prescribes. Why? Not out of duty, but out of love, love for who He is and what He's done for you (John 14:15, 21). So then, whom do you live to please — yourself, other people, or the Lord? Who has your allegiance and obedience?

The Eclipse

April 14 — 1 Samuel 17:32-19:24

Today In Your Reading...

David killed Goliath and became an instant hero in all of Israel. To reward him, King Saul made him a commander in his army and gave his daughter Michal to him in marriage. By leading his men on many successful expeditions against the enemy, David's fame eclipsed the King's and that, of course, did not sit well with Saul.

We will follow Saul's descent into jealousy in the days to come. For today, I'd like to focus on David's victory over the Philistine champion. When Goliath entered the scene, a colossal character who taunted and terrorized Saul's army, every Israelite soldier and staff member was dismayed, except for David. He couldn't believe that this monster was allowed to trash talk "the army of the living God." He, of course, volunteered to confront Goliath and the rest is history — *fallen giant, rising star!*

Did you notice that everyone ran away from Goliath, but David ran towards him? Why is that? Goliath's size, strength, arrogance, and intimidating words caused everyone to cower in fear, yet David was not afraid. Why not? Was it because David was a suicidal maniac who had a death wish? No. Was it because David was brimming with self-confidence? He was described as a mighty man of valor, but no. In fact, we see David running from Saul. Why, then, was David willing to face the giant when no one else would? *It all came down to who eclipsed whom?*

During a solar eclipse, the light from the sun is temporarily blocked by the moon. Thus, a larger object is "hidden" by a much smaller one. Oftentimes, when we face difficult circumstances, **we focus on the size of the problem and allow it to eclipse the truth of the sovereignty and might of God.** In the account of Goliath, David was the only person who looked at him in comparison to the power of his God. "You come

to me with sword, and spear, and javelin," he said, "but I come to you in the name of the Lord Almighty!" **While everyone else had their eyes on the big man, David had his eyes on his big God;** and, *big problems are no match for a big God!*

Daily Reflection

How does one reach such a confident faith like that of David? Did you notice how David explained it to Saul? God had delivered him before from lions and bears. How does that apply here?

You will not wake up one day with the faith of David. **Faith is added each day, stretched and strengthened as you trust God with each trial.** The catch is you will be tempted to focus on the size of your problems and let them intimidate you, cause you to fear and cower. Instead, *you must look past the problem, as David did, to the size and might of your God.*

Have you ever allowed your problems to eclipse your God? What lessons did you learn?

It's a matter of faith and perspective. Step out of the shadow of the giants and, instead, view them from the vantage point of heaven. Say to them, **"Today, the Lord will conquer you!"**

Faithful Friends

April 15 — 1 Samuel 20:1-21:15; Psalm 34

Today In Your Reading...

Because of the success that David had against Goliath and the Philistines, and because of David's ensuing popularity with the people of Israel, King Saul became enraged at and jealous of David, and he even sought to kill him. However, Saul's daughter, Michal, and son, Jonathan, loved David very much, and both of them went to great lengths to protect his life. Jonathan even went so far as to make a covenant with David, a promise to honor him and his descendants forever.

After leaving Jonathan, David fled to the help of the High Priest, Ahimelech, in the city of Nob. David deceived him in order to get food and a weapon, a lie that will have grave consequences when King Saul finds out. From Nob David fled to a place where Saul would least expect him to be, among the Philistines.

I was encouraged by a truth today, a truth that includes two people. The truth is this — **faithful friends are a blessing**, and the first of David's friends mentioned today was Jonathan. When David was at the lowest point in his life (so far), and when he felt like the world was crashing down around him, his friend Jonathan proved to be truthful and trustworthy. What an amazing picture of love and loyalty, that Jonathan, who was next in line to be King and who had every right to feel threatened by David, instead honored David above himself. When he had every right to treat David as an enemy, he instead treated him as a friend. When he had every right to push him away, Jonathan promised friendship and faithfulness.

Where do we find friends like that, the kind that will stand by us through the most difficult times in life? Where do we find those who will never betray our trust? No matter what we confide in them, they will never belittle us, never look

down on us, and never shame us for our shortcomings. Where do we find a person who will love us at all times, who will extend grace with our faults, who will forgive us when we fail, and who will comfort us in our fear? I'm not sure that we ever "find" that kind of friend, one who is closer than a sibling. **That type of friend is given to us from above.** He or she is a divine treasure, a blessing from heaven.

Daily Reflection

Do you have a Jonathan in your life? Who came to mind as you read about him today? What about this person do you appreciate most? Have you communicated your love and appreciation for this friend recently?

What kind of friend are you? Have you ever proven to be a Jonathan to someone else?

I said that our truth today included two people. **The other person, who is the most faithful Friend you have, is the Lord.** While Jonathan was all of the things I described, he was only human. He could only be in one place at a time, and, unfortunately, David could not always be in his presence. To whom would David turn when he was not in earshot of his dear friend? He turned to His God.

As He was with David, your God is with you at all times; and He is always available to listen, to comfort, and to encourage. He will never betray you, and He will never fail you or forsake you. **He is the ultimate faithful Friend.**