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1 Samuel 11-12

"Learning Where Your Strength Lies"

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Let's open our Bibles tonight to 1 Samuel 11 as we continue our journey through the Old Testament historical books.

We've mentioned to you several times that narrative books are meant to learn from in the sense that God gives us a story - it's true - but He only gives us what He wants us to know. So the best thing you can do is put yourself in the lives and in the narrative that you read and try to learn from the perspective of the people that God sets before you.

1 and 2 Samuel are several years of coverage - about 130 years from the birth of Samuel, in 1100 or so B.C., until almost the death of King David; so 130, I guess, years in all. But the first couple of chapters really are the birth of Samuel. The key to learning, at least early on in this book, is that this comes at the end of the book of Judges; 300-plus years of the nation not doing very well after the death of Joshua. So the people would hurt, and they would rebel, and God would send someone to either conquer them or dominate them. They would get sick of it at some point, cry out to God who would send them a judge, a deliverer. It would last for a while, and then that same thing would just set in again. Sounds kind of like our lives sometimes, right? But it was literally ten generations, nine generations, of this same kind of behavior. Samuel is the last judge. It leads to the kings - the two kings in the united kingdom and then lots of kings in the divided kingdom. But at least early on with Samuel's birth - a godly man in the midst of a very ungodly people - the lessons are mostly learned not from Samuel but from the nation itself. And that's certainly the case tonight.

We've been introduced to Saul, and we'll get to him tonight but also in the weeks that are following in the chapters, and then a lot of the lessons come from Saul himself. But at least tonight, because the people had been asking for a king, the lesson comes from the nation itself and their response to Samuel.

Back in chapters 1 and 2 of Samuel, we are told of Samuel's birth. He was born to a woman named Hannah. She had not been able to have children for years. She came to Shiloh, where the tabernacle stood, for the Feast Days; cried out to God year after year without any kind of answer. Yet she remained faithful to the

LORD. When Samuel was born, she named him Samuel; it means "God has heard." Promised the LORD that she would give this boy back to the LORD to serve Him all the days of his life; that she didn't really want a child just to have one (because the culture said if you didn't, God wasn't with you), she just wanted to be a vessel God could use. And God answered. She weaned this child for three to five years or so, brought him with her husband to the tabernacle, handed him over to the guidance and direction of Eli who at that time was the high priest.

Like I said, narratives are only what God wants you to know. So by the time you get to chapter 3, ten years pass, and all of a sudden Samuel, who was 3 or 4 years old, is now a teenager, and he is living at the tabernacle. And for the first time in his life, God speaks to him. We don't think it was audibly, but he heard a voice call to him, and he faithfully responded. The first message he was given was there was bad news for Eli. He had not been a good father. He was a good man. He served well in the position as a high priest, but he didn't serve his family very well; never did restrain his children from doing wicked things. They worked with him at the tabernacle. They stole from people. They committed sexual sin. They were just a horrible bunch of boys that stumbled a lot of people. And the LORD said, in chapter 3, through Samuel, to Eli, "Knock it off! Go deal with your sons before it's too late." He didn't. By the time you get to the end of chapter 3, chapter 4 begins, twenty-five years pass, and the only thing we're told is that Samuel, as a man now in his 30's and pushing 40, had begun to just preach. And for the first time in many years, the nation of Israel had a consistent voice from the LORD to the people, and Samuel was that guy; he's faithful. And so you would expect to see some fruit that maybe would come out of that, but that wasn't the case. The children of Israel, even after forty years, decided that when their enemies, the Philistines, would come up to fight them that they would try to fight their foes without the aid or the blessings of God or even the counsel of God. And so you find, in the narrative, Samuel - the prophet, the spokesman for the LORD - disappears from the scene in chapter 3 (at the end), and he doesn't reappear until the nation decides that they want the LORD back in their lives, till there's a repentance, if you will, in chapter 7.

So chapters 4 and 5 address this issue of the children of Israel going to fight. They lose a battle; four thousand people die. They decide that that was because they didn't have a God with them on their shoulders like the Philistines. So they went and got the ark, and they carried God into battle; not the LORD that they should be trusting in that they can't see, but the idol or the representation of God.

They became like the idolaters that they were fighting. And rather than winning, thirty thousand men are put to death. Their tabernacle is taken from them. The Philistines, who believed in idols, quickly learned that God is nothing to be messed with. Their god is broken in pieces by the time He's done, and every major city - all five of the Philistine cities of Gath and Ekron and Ashkelon and Ashdod and Gaza - suffers great consequences. There's a soreness and these boils that appeared on men's bodies. It was horrible! And so they just decided they didn't want this idol at all. They sent it back.

In chapters 6 and 7, miraculously, it goes back, and it ends up at the house of a fellow named Abinadab for nearly twenty years. So a lot of years pass in pretty quick succession. Eventually, in chapter 7, Israel, after all of those years, wants to get right with God again. And it wasn't so much that they wanted to get right with God as they were losing, constantly, the battles against their enemies. And so it kind of drove them to their knees. In their desire to recommit themselves to the LORD in repentance, Samuel reappears - the Word of God, the man of God - and he meets them in a place called Mizpah. The enemy is there, waiting to fight. The LORD delivers His people because they were willing to call upon Him. They put a stone in the midst of this place - the Ebenezer stone. It literally means "God has brought us this far."

And it isn't until twenty more years or so pass between chapters 7 and 8, and Samuel is now in his 70's, that we only learn of one thing during, again, those silent years: and that is Samuel has a yearly ministry tour, if you will, or a circuit of preaching. He's going to the nation and bringing God's Word to the people. If nothing else, God has been faithful to this nation for the better part of sixty years: one voice, one man, consistent, constant, no interruption at all. He's faithful to bring God's Word to the people and yet, despite his ministry, and true to form, the nation slowly begins to drift away from the LORD even though God has, for years, protected them from their enemies. And they decide that they really want to be more like other nations, and they come (in chapter 8) to Samuel, and they say, "You know, you're about to die, you're gettin' old. We don't like your boys, they're crooked," and apparently his sons weren't very honest. They were judges. God does not rebuke Samuel, so I'm assuming he did all he could to deal with them (not at all like Eli), but everyone has a free will to do what they want. And so Samuel just hurt. After all these years, he's just looking for some fruit; he's finding none. And so he goes to the LORD angry, and the LORD said, "Look, it's not you. They've rejected Me yet again like they've been doing since I brought 'em out

of Egypt. This is just the way that the people work. And don't take it personally. In fact, go tell them that 'You can have what you want if that's what you want,' but warn them about the cost." And so Samuel goes back, and he says, "Your taxes are gonna go up. Your kids are gonna be taken by the king and forced into servanthood. There's gonna be corruption at the top. They're gonna take from you your best goods and your best homes and the lands, and they're gonna give them to the king." The operative words that Samuel uses as he explains what they're really asking for are the words, "He will take, he will take, he will take." He says it time and time again (you can read there towards the end of chapter 8). And they didn't have to wait long for God to put His plan into motion. God points out Saul. He had planned to have an earthly king for them; we know that because in the Law were the rules for the king. But it wasn't to be this king. This was a king like the world; that was what the people wanted, not what the LORD wanted. In fact, it says in Hosea (13:11), the LORD said, "I gave you a king in My anger, and took him away in My wrath." This wasn't God's choice. In fact, we know from Genesis 49:8-12 that the king God would give to the people would come through Judah; Jesus would come through the line of Judah, not through Benjamin. But for now, the LORD was going to, in patience, deal with His people. Perhaps by the end of his reign, the people would realize they needed a king that wasn't just qualified because he was a good looking tall guy or anything else but because he had a heart for the LORD.

So, in chapters 9 and 10, we see this calling of Saul - the miracles that took place to get him to where he wanted to be: the loss of donkeys, the oversight of God, the counsel of Samuel about his mission, the private anointing, all of the signs and wonders that came with it, the pouring out of the Spirit upon Saul's life, the changing of his heart, surrounded by men who the LORD had put His Spirit upon. Literally, God gave to Saul every advantage that a believer should get as he walks with God. Yet when he arrived home after this whole experience of a few days, his uncle asked him where he'd been, he says, "Well, I heard that you found the donkeys." He didn't tell him anything of.....you read chapters 9 and 10, man, you have a story to tell. He said nothing. When the people were gathered together in Mizpah by Samuel, publicly, to anoint Saul as king, he was hiding; had to be found and God had to point out where he was. So, in the end, Samuel gave Saul the rules for the king to rule over His people. It's found at the end of chapter 10 here; it's found in Deuteronomy 17 as well. And we kind of leave, in verse 26, Saul with valiant men whose hearts God has touched. And then verse 27 of chapter 10, many people excited about having that king that they wanted; others that were already not liking him. But that's just the way it goes when you begin to serve.

Tonight, as the people embrace their new king, the lesson comes from the nation because they've been moved by outward appearances. They have been delivered under Saul's watch, as we will read. The people will point out their victory as confirmation that they made a right choice. And so it is the king. And Samuel will stand up, as he gives his last speech, and just say, "I'm quitting now, you have a king," to say to the people, "You've got to learn where your strength lies." And I guess if you had to write a lesson over these two chapters, that would be it: learn where your strength lies. Because it doesn't lie with a king, it doesn't lie with a chariot, it doesn't lie with money, it doesn't lie with power. It lies with your faith in God. Whenever they had trusted the LORD, the last 300-400 years, everything was fine. Whenever they looked anywhere else, it was a downhill race. And the reason it took so long to blow up is because God is so patient. But you trust in your king, and you're on the ship of disobedience, and you're going to be standing in judgment before the LORD. It's not going to go anywhere. And that's what, really, these two chapters tell us.

By the time we get to chapter 13, God gives us two very big campaigns of Saul's that disqualify him from ministry - in two different directions, over many different years. And it's the only two pictures you get of Saul falling on his face and being disqualified. But, until we get there, the people are very proud of him and very much assured that they picked the right guy to follow.

So here we are, chapter 11. You knew we'd get there eventually. I don't know if I can do a summary every week until we get to the end, but we'll try. Verse 1 says, "Then Nahash the Ammonite came up and encamped against Jabesh Gilead; and all the men of Jabesh said to Nahash, 'Make a covenant with us, and we will serve you.' And Nahash the Ammonite answered them, 'On this condition I will make a covenant with you, that I may put out all your right eyes, and bring reproach on all Israel.' Then the elders of Jabesh said to him, 'Hold off for seven days, that we may send messengers to all the territory of Israel. And then, if there is no one to save us, we will come out to you.' " "And we'll heed your threat," if you will. Now the Ammonites were descendants of Lot, you might remember, from Genesis 19. They are the result of Lot's relationship - an illicit one - with his youngest daughter. They were an aggressive, hostile people. They settled on the east side of the Jordan, about where Amman, Jordan is today. But throughout their history, and throughout biblical history, they were always the enemies of God's people. In Judges 3, they joined Eglon the Moabite to try to eliminate all of the eastern tribes, claiming the land belonged to them. Here, this Ammonite ruler - named by

his parents Nahash which, by the way, is the word for "serpent" (I don't know if you're a parent, that's what you're goin' for right away) - attacks this town of Jabesh Gilead, about twenty-five miles from the Sea of Galilee south towards Beth Shean (those of you that have been to Israel). The Ammonites, notice, are very cocky. The children of Israel are very weak because they've just decided to go it alone. So this guy confidently taunts the people, and they say, "Maybe we can make peace. We don't want you to kill us." And he goes, "All right. I'm just gonna poke everybody's right eye out! And then we'll call it a day." And they went, "Well, give us a week, see if we've got any supporters, else I guess we'll do that." The people were terrified. You can imagine. This is a brutal society. There's a lack of cohesion amongst the tribes. They don't expect much help.

So we read, in verse 4, "So the messengers came to Gibeah of Saul" (that's where Saul lived) "and told the news in the hearing of the people. And all the people" (in Gibeah, Saul's home town) "lifted up their voices and wept. Now there was Saul, coming behind the herd from the field; and Saul said, 'What troubles the people, that they weep?' And they told him the words of the men of Jabesh. Then the Spirit of God came upon Saul when he heard this news, and his anger was greatly aroused. So he took a yoke of oxen and cut them in pieces, and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel by the hands of messengers, saying, 'Whoever does not go out with Saul and Samuel to battle, so it shall be done to his oxen.' And the fear of the LORD fell on the people," (I guess so) "and they came out with one consent. When he numbered them in Bezek, the children of Israel were three hundred thousand, and the men of Judah thirty thousand." The people of Gibeah of Benjamin worried about what they heard - this threat that was made against Gibeah. And I find it interesting that no one thought, "We should go get our big King Saul." Even though Saul lived in town, he was the newly-appointed king, he had returned from his ordination to go back to taking care of livestock, back to farming. Not exactly your kingly guy. In fact, when everyone is weeping in town, he goes, "Why is everyone so upset?" This was not a leader. Right? But notice that, at this time, the LORD put His Spirit upon Saul's life, and God was going to do something to save and to deliver His people. But He wanted the people to make the comparison between trusting in God and trusting in this guy who's really a loser in every sense of the word. He doesn't care. I mean, who do you want to lead in a ministry? Someone that just has a business sense or great talent or men of influence? No. You want someone that is filled with the Spirit. Right? That's what you want. You want someone who is moved by the Holy Spirit. Saul, here, is unwilling to be stirred in his heart by the things of God. He hasn't one time showed

any interest at all in what God wants to do. In time to come, and it won't take long, he will become an unresponsive guy even to the work of God. For now, he's willing, he's young, and he's mad. But it won't take long before he just doesn't care at all. So he does something that's radical and sensational and very effective. He cuts up a couple of oxen, sends them to everyone, and says, "Either way, you're gonna lose. You're gonna either lose by the hands of Saul or by the hand of the LORD or by the hand of the enemy. But if you don't show up, you're done for." That was not a good motivator, really. Fear. But it worked. And the people came, moved by a fear of the LORD, without exception. So God is working in Saul. And notice that Saul is hitching his wagon to the old prophet, Samuel. Notice what he says, "If you don't want to come to battle with Saul and Samuel," the godliest man that was alive in the day, the man with the long reputation, the one who God spoke through.

Well, they come together in verse 8 - not as an army that's well-equipped or trained, because God usually uses people that honor Him and can't take much credit. They are an armed tribal people. Remember Samuel had warned them about conscription. At Bezek - the word means "lightning" - the men gathered. They counted them up; they found three hundred thousand from the eight and a half tribes on this side of the Jordan and thirty thousand from Judah alone. But remember Judah was the ones that bordered the land with the Philistines, so these guys were in the thick of it. They would have had to leave reserves home to protect their families. But let's just say they had the most to lose, early on (was the tribe of Judah), and they sent thirty thousand men, again, at the threat and at the behest of Saul. But if we go back to verse 6, the Holy Spirit is involved here, and so God is doing a work.

Verse 9, "And they said to the messengers who came, 'Thus you shall say to the men of Jabesh Gilead: "Tomorrow, by the time the sun is hot, you shall have help." ' Then the messengers came and reported it to the men of Jabesh, and they were glad" (to hear someone was coming to help them). "Therefore the men of Jabesh said," (to this guy, Nahash) " 'Tomorrow we will come out to you, and you may do with us whatever seems good to you.' " Which really wasn't a lie. "We plan to come out tomorrow with three hundred and thirty thousand of our helpers." Verse 11, "So it was, on the next day, that Saul put the people in three companies; and they came into the midst of the camp in the morning watch, and killed Ammonites until the heat of the day. And it happened that those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together." This plan or this strategy of war where there're these three groups that go out on three flanks - by the way, you'll find it

repeated a lot in the Scriptures, it's a pretty good technique. I want you to not lose track of the fact that the LORD is working on Saul by His Spirit. You want to see God work in your life, then go where God is leading. Right? I think the hardest thing for us sometimes is to discover where God is going. Pastor Chuck used to say to us young men (that used to sit under his ministry, especially the elders' group), he would say, "Your job is to find out where God is going and then go with Him. Learn to just be led of the Spirit." And it was a lesson that the people needed to learn as well because they were viewing this whole experience from the standpoint of, "Our guy is a victor, our guy is the guy that delivered us," rather than learning that a mission from God always succeeds. But if you ascribe that success to a new king or a good plan or to overwhelming odds or the art of surprise or the luck of the draw, you might walk away not ever learning a thing at all. That's exactly what the people will do. "We told you our king would help us. What do you think now, Samuel, you smarty pants?" That was the response of the nation. Rather than learning what they hadn't learned in 400 years - God is the One that brings victory, not man - they fall back immediately to that song that they sing.

So, notice what we read in verse 12, "Then the people said to Samuel," (poor old, 80-year-old Samuel) " 'Who is he who said, "Shall Saul reign over us?" Bring the men, that we may put them to death.' " Arrogant. Self-assured. Flying in the face of the warning God had given them through Samuel. But it was going to be a short-lived celebration, and Samuel will have to warn them again in the very next chapter. But, like I said, these two chapters - the lesson doesn't come so much from Saul (although he's part of the action) but from the people who still can't seem to get it right.

It is Saul who stands up at this point and says, verse 13, "But Saul said, 'Not a man shall be put to death this day, for today the LORD has accomplished salvation in Israel.' " And I would say to you - if you're somebody who marks up your Bible - mark that down because you won't find Saul saying anything even close to this smart ever again. I mean, this is Saul at his finest. Right? If this had stayed in his heart, God could have given the nation great deliverance. Unfortunately, soon power and self-confidence and this lack of seeking God will head Saul down a road to a great fall. But for now, he seems to see clearly. At least he said so to save the lives of those who might have stood with Samuel at one point and said, "We don't need a king, we need the LORD." So God protected, I think, His own.

Well we read, in verse 14, "Then Samuel said to the people," (after this great victory) " 'Come, let us go to Gilgal and renew the kingdom there.' So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the LORD in Gilgal. There they made sacrifices of peace offerings before the LORD, and there Saul and all the men of Israel rejoiced greatly." So, "Let's now get together and recognize what God has done." Samuel would take this as his final opportunity to remind the people of this one lesson - learn where your strength or where your victory lies. Know where your strength lies. Gilgal was only about thirty miles or so across the border into the Land of Promise. It was here at Gilgal - where the people of Israel had first stopped - when they had entered the Land over 400 years earlier with Joshua (in chapters 4 and 5). It was here in Gilgal that they had grabbed those twelve rocks, you remember, from the raging waters of the Jordan at harvest time; that the LORD had rolled back the river for the people to be able to cross during that flood season. It rolled eighteen miles or so upstream. The word "Gilgal" means that: rolling. It was rolling back, a river that rolled back. They took the twelve rocks from the river bed. They put them on the shore, and they made a memorial out of it to say, "Look what the LORD did in bringing us here." So Samuel now stands in the place that had great history so that he could talk about - know where your strength lies. It's a great place to pick. It had absolute significance to the people. And I think that he wanted to impress upon them - fresh from a victory of the LORD - that they were celebrating the wrong person, they were looking in the wrong place, they had drawn the wrong conclusion. And so here they are gathered for what would become.....now Samuel's going to appear again for a few more chapters with us to speak God's Word - but for the most part, he steps out of the way when Saul steps in. So this is kind of his farewell advice to the nation upon Saul's coronation. They're going to renew the kingdom and all.

We read, in verse 1 of chapter 12, "Now Samuel said to all Israel: 'Indeed I have heeded your voice in all that you said to me, and have made a king over you. And now here is the king, walking before you; and I am old and grayheaded, and look, my sons are with you. I have walked before you from my childhood to this day. Here I am. Witness against me before the LORD and before His anointed: Whose ox have I taken, or whose donkey have I taken, or whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed, or from whose hand have I received any bribe with which to blind my eyes? I will restore it to you.' And they said, 'You have not cheated us or oppressed us, nor have you taken anything from any man's hand.' Then he said to them, 'The LORD is witness against you, and His anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand.' And they answered, 'He is witness.' " Now

Samuel, as I said, was officially stepping down. He was retiring. And after his long service as a judge, as a political leader, as a voice for God, the only official prophet in the land for sixty years, he had very little to show for his life. No one was listening, no one was turning. I don't know if you ever feel like, "Gosh, I've been prayin' for that person for twenty years and nothin'," as if somehow you're just spinnin' your wheels, as if somehow what you've done absolutely doesn't matter at all. But Samuel had done it faithfully. He hadn't used his place of power and authority to serve himself; he had served the people. He hadn't used it in a corrupt manner; he had a clean record. And he asks the people, as he's stepping down, if they have anything against him of his sixty years of service. Sounds like.....I'm not sure that any politician could get away with this today, but Samuel was clean, man. I mean, clean. "You've known me since I was a kid. You know my children, even though they were pretty disappointing. I want you to declare your judgment of my service." He had an outstanding career. He was a man who gave his life. His hands were clean. His reputation was above reproach. I don't know how many of us could be interviewed like this. But what a guy, you know? And how the people, to me, still desired someone else after this makes no sense. I mean, isn't this all you want from those over you? Just honesty and diligence and faithfulness and godliness? What more could you ask for?! "Well, we want a guy like the other nations." Well then you're gonna get a corrupt guy! When you have someone that is honoring to the LORD, his leadership was beyond question. But here's the blindness and the madness of sin in the lives of the people - because if God's out of the equation, then you want what everyone else around you wants. You want things like the world. And their assessment was that, though he had never taken advantage of them and he had nothing to restore to them, they didn't want him nor did they want his sons.

Having justified himself, verse 6, "Then Samuel said to the people, 'It is the LORD who raised up Moses and Aaron, and who brought your fathers up from the land of Egypt. Now therefore, stand still, that I may reason with you before the LORD concerning all the righteous acts of the LORD which He did to you and your fathers.' " Having justified his life as proof of the faithfulness of God to those faithful to Him, Samuel now uses this opportunity to speak to the people directly about their history. This is a plea of an 80- or 90-year-old guy to a people that he has given his life for. He will illustrate his message directly from Israel's history because that's what they knew best. He starts with their deliverance from Egypt, the many victories over the enemies in the Land of Promise - as recently as the one they just were celebrating a day before over these Ammonites that were going to

poke everybody's eye out. So he says.....I can just see this old guy, maybe he's shaky by now, I don't know, "Stand still. Stand still. I want to reason with you about your need to trust the LORD. I want you to look at all the evidence." And the lesson's clear. It's unavoidable. You can't look the other way. You can't apply it somehow in a different manner. He starts off, even in verse 6, "It is the LORD who raised up the leaders and brought deliverance, not the leaders who brought the deliverance. It was the LORD. It was the LORD who raised up your leaders. It was the LORD who brought your fathers up out of the land of Egypt. He raised up these guys. But it was the LORD." His point is, "God may have given you Saul, but it's still the LORD." Right? That's still the argument.

And then he quickly runs 430 years of history in a couple of verses. He says, in verse 8, " 'When Jacob had gone into Egypt, and your fathers cried out to the LORD, then the LORD sent Moses and Aaron, who brought your fathers out of Egypt and made them dwell in this place.' " "It was the cries of the nation, just like you, in bondage in Egypt that fell upon the LORD's ears, and the LORD brought them deliverers. It wasn't the deliverers; it was the LORD who brought them deliverers." You see the difference. Though these men were great men of God, it was the LORD who used them as tools to answer the cry of His people. When God spoke to Moses (there in Exodus 3), and he was in the wilderness, and he was 80 years old, and he'd been there forty years (after having left Pharaoh's life as Pharaoh's son), the LORD said in Exodus 3:7 to Moses, "I've seen the oppression of My people in Egypt. I've heard their cries because of their taskmasters. I know the sorrows they face. I have come down to deliver them from the hands of the Egyptians and to bring them up into a good and large land flowing with milk and honey, a place where, today, live the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites," all those "ites" (seven of them). He says, "Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to Me. I've seen their oppression from Egypt. Come, therefore. I will send you to Pharaoh so that you can bring the children of Israel out of Egypt." But He starts with, "I've heard their cry. I know what they're going through. I see their sorrows. I'm going to come deliver them. I've come down to help them. I'm going to use you." But the point is very clear - God has to use you. If God doesn't use you, Moses swings and misses. But God was with him. And God had been with Saul. The Spirit of God had come upon Saul. But to their argument, "Let's just kill everything," Saul's not the right choice is a lesson that the people hadn't yet learned. Where does your strength lie? So, God had heard. God would deliver. To God alone be the glory. Later it was the LORD who brought them into this Land of

Promise to dwell in this place. But notice again - it was God who brought them here. That very truth that God got you here, sustained you here, had been forgotten by this generation, and now they were forgetting it again.

Verse 9, " 'And when they forgot the LORD their God,' " notice, " 'He sold them into the hand of Sisera, commander of the army of Hazor, into the hand of the Philistines, and into the hand of the king of Moab; and they fought against them. Then they cried out to the LORD, and said, "We have sinned, because we have forsaken the LORD and served the Baals and Ashtoreths; but now deliver us from the hand of our enemies, and we will serve You." And the LORD sent Jerubbaal, Bedan,' " (by the way, Bedan is Syrian for Deborah) " 'Jephthah, and Samuel, and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side; and you dwelt in safety.' " I don't think you can mess up the message: you forget God's work, you're left in the hands of various enemies. The years of the judges replayed the same scenario time and again - the sin-drome....how rough life can be if you forget God, how rough life can be if you just forget every lesson you've ever learned, you go back to being stupid every time. In fact, whenever the nation called out to the LORD, He came. He came. He came almost immediately. He came when only 10% of the nation were repentant. He came when only 10 out of 1000 wanted to see God work. The faces were different. God was always the same. And when you dwelt in safety, it was because you cried out, "We've sinned, and we forgot about You." Samuel, I think, probably was just furious. Seemed like....not a volatile guy but certainly a passionate guy; and even this old timer, man, I think he'd have moved a mountain, wouldn't he? But his point is obvious: when Israel turned to God, God was there to help and to deliver. Though the vessels changed, the victory was solely dependent upon trust in Him. And the determining factor in every century was faith in God. It wasn't faith in Deborah or Jephthah or even Samuel. Though they had often forsaken God and turned to idolatry, God had never forsaken them. And when God was called upon, He came. His ways are simple and easy to follow. Same thing with us. We complicate this a lot, but if you trust God, God can do great things in your life. You start trusting in everyone or anything else - your job, your friend, promises of a neighbor, bank account, health, strength - swing and a miss. And life gets hard. Remember, this is narrative. We just stand with these folks. Look around to these hundreds of thousands of people goin', "We love that King Saul. He's tall as can be. I told you he would help us." He didn't help you at all! He was farmin'. He didn't even know there were problems! And until God fell upon him and made him mad, he wasn't doin' anything! And in the years to come, he's not gonna do anything right! And the people will be led down to disaster. It

isn't until David comes.....a guy that was very faulty, had lots of issues, but he loved the LORD. God was first in his heart, and the people benefited as a result.

So Samuel applies what he had said of the past to the present. He says, in verse 12, " 'And when you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites came against you, you said to me, "No, but a king shall reign over us," when the LORD your God was your king.' " Now here's some more insight that we don't and aren't given until this point, but apparently it was not just Samuel was old, and his boys were crooked; they were under assault. And, under assault, Samuel said, "Trust the LORD. He's your King. Seek the LORD." And they said, "No. That's not gonna work. We need a king. We need a guy that we can look up to." And even in the midst of this battle that the LORD would eventually deliver them from - through putting His Spirit upon Saul - the people themselves had no interest in God being their King. They just wanted to look like the world and operate on that level. This generation had done something different than the previous one, something even worse: not only had they forgotten God in their distress, in their real distress they still refused to listen to Him even though the one guy that, for sixty years, had proven himself absolutely on point with God said that they should trust God, and they said, "No. No. We'll do it our way." And now God, who had come to their national rescue, when the nation had turned its back upon Him just days earlier, they now need to be told, "If the LORD had been your King, then you wouldn't have demanded another king at all." It does amaze me that even when we experience the work of God in answering prayers in the past, it doesn't cure me from the temptation, next time, to trust in anything else. You would think that would get easier or better or we'd get smarter, or maybe we'd pile up a bunch of experience and go, "Oh, I've got it now." We don't got it now. We're dumb as doorknobs. "God, help me this time," and He does, and you go, "Yeah, but that was last time, this is this time." As if somehow the principle changes and God doesn't work the same in every situation. He does! In everything. And that's Samuel's argument, "Four hundred years, God is faithful; four hundred years. Every time you called, He was there. And now you face these guys, and I say, 'Trust the LORD,' and you say, 'No! We want someone else.' And so God gives you someone else, and then you give him credit, not the LORD." Poor 90-year-old man's tearin' his hair out. And who can blame him? It doesn't seem to help us to trust the LORD. We need a daily walk that is maintained daily. Even after a hundred examples of God's care, somehow Trouble #101 still finds us slow to believe in Him and eager to find alternatives to faith, to doubt God's love, to wonder about His ability, to question His willingness to help. We're still in that stupid spot when we should have moved along by now. God hasn't failed

us. It's always that same spiritual battle, and we're prone to doubt though we've been delivered from Sisera and the Philistines and the Moabites and Nahash and the Ammonites. "Yeah, but that was different. This trial is spiritual. This trial is employment. This trial is financial. This trial is health-related. This trial is relationship. This is different!" No, it's not different! Different enemy, same issue, same God. The new danger always looked to be the worst. "We need a king now." Well, they had a king. But Samuel wants to say to them, "He's not your answer, and the LORD is your answer. And any substitute for Him and having faith in Him will leave you powerless, and you'll be defeated again. Because the lesson is - figure out where your strength lies and stay there."

He says, in verse 13, "Now therefore, here is the king whom you have chosen and whom you have desired. And take note, the LORD has set a king over you. If you fear the LORD and serve Him and obey His voice, and do not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then both you and the king who reigns over you will continue following the LORD your God. However, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then the hand of the LORD will be against you, as it was against your fathers.'" "If you wanted and desired a king, well there he is. You only have him because God gave him to you, and He gave him to you with warnings as to what it will cost you. Will he do what God has done? Will he satisfy your needs? Will he bring you deliverance? He cannot. You fear God first; and if you'll do that, you and the king'll be fine, and your little kingdom will be fine. But set God aside, and no king will matter. None of the other things you opt to trust in rather than the LORD will stand up to this kind of scrutiny." It all falls under that, "You'll thirst again." It's a pretty good lesson. It's clearly written out for us so we can't miss it. Only God satisfies. Whatever you think that if you get it, it will make life okay, it won't. "I need a raise." Good. There's your raise. Now what? "I need a new position. I need a woman to love." But all that thinking misses the boat. God can give you all you need, but you need Him; that's all you need. Without Him, nothing will satisfy, last or be blessed. Because the people needed to learn. They needed to trust God. They now trusted in Saul, and, man, what a disappointment Saul's gonna be! I think about that when I watch Christians and politics and their great excitement about one guy over another. Trust the LORD; we'll all be good. Preach the gospel; we'll change the world.

Verse 14 says, "If you fear the LORD and serve Him and obey His voice, don't rebel, then you and the king'll be fine. But if not, you're gonna be fighting against

God just like your fathers did." It's an interesting comparison, isn't it? Though God had given them their foolish request for a king, nothing had changed in their situation. God's way of blessing - it was just as it was in the past. The establishment of a king, the establishment of a kingdom didn't negate the fact that their blessings and their cursing would come, and it would be related directly to their walk with God. They still needed the LORD now more than ever, and the king didn't solve that issue at all. And that's the key, isn't it? Their problem has never been the lack of a king; only their lack of recognizing and worshipping the King of kings.

And if that isn't good enough, he goes on in verse 16, and he says, " 'Now therefore, stand and see this great thing which the LORD will do before your eyes: Is today not the wheat harvest? I will call to the LORD, and He will send thunder and rain, that you may perceive and see that your wickedness is great, which you have done in the sight of the LORD, in asking a king for yourselves.' " Samuel just couldn't get over this.

Verse 18, "So Samuel called to the LORD, and the LORD sent thunder and rain that day; and all the people greatly feared the LORD and Samuel." If their 400 years of history wasn't enough, then, "Let Me give you one more sign." And God is so good, so patient, He gives them another sign. Here's another sign: thunder at a time when rain was not to be expected. And notice, everyone feared the LORD, and they feared this old timer.

"And all the people said," verse 19, "to Samuel, 'Pray for your servants to the LORD your God, that we may not die; for we have added to all our sins the evil of asking a king for ourselves.' " A quick confession. But unfortunately, like most faith built solely on signs and wonders rather than God's Word, it doesn't last. It is soon shattered. Repentance due to showers fades with the rising of the sun. So they say this, "Pray to the LORD your God." Not to the LORD our God. Pray to your God. Interesting, isn't it? And that was the issue. He was not their God. God belonged to Samuel. But He wanted to belong to the people. Even though, in verse 12, if you go back, he said, "Your God was your king. Your God." But He's not your God anymore, now He's "my God." Most people that are desperate will pray. I don't know if you ever saw that movie years ago that Burt Reynolds was in called "The End." It was always a good example to me. It's a dumb movie. But anyway, at some point he wants to kill himself, so he swims out to the ocean figuring he'll swim out so far, he'll never get back. And so he goes out far. And then he decides that's a

bad idea. This is no way to die. Drowning doesn't sound at all appealing. So he turns around, and he starts to swim towards the shore, and he says to the LORD, "If You can get me to the shore without me dying, I will serve You with everything I have." And then he looks up after a while and thinks, "Maybe I can make it!" So he says to the LORD, "Like I said, if you can get me to the shore, I'll give You 50% of everything that I have." (Laughing) And then it gets down to 25 and then 10, and finally he gets to the beach, and he goes, "LORD, You know I was just kiddin'." Everyone prays when they're in trouble. Well that's the issue here. "Pray to your God." That was the problem. It wasn't theirs. True repentance will drive you to your God. "Please pray for us, Samuel. We've added to our list of sins the evil of asking a king for ourselves." Now that's absolutely true, but they didn't mean it. That's the problem. They knew their sin. It just didn't drive them to repentance.

So this is what Samuel says to the people, verse 20, " 'Do not fear. You have done all this wickedness; yet do not turn aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart. And do not turn aside; for then you would go after empty things which cannot profit or deliver, for they are nothing. For the LORD will not forsake His people, for His great name's sake, because it has pleased the LORD to make you His people.' " Samuel gives great advice. He says this to these people, "If you're truly repentant, don't worry about it. It's done. Your past is your past. Now wake up and walk with God in the present tense. Are you really sorry? Start doin' it right." Rather than, "Oh, you don't know the trouble I've seen, you don't know where I've been." Yeah, I don't care, either. Just start walkin' with God now. That's exactly what Samuel says. He brought up 400 years of problems and then says, "Forget about them. You want to really repent? Then walk with God. Start now forsaking the wickedness of your self ways. Start walking with God with all of your heart." It's good to remember what you deserve and what God has delivered you from. So be humble and thankful, and go forward.

He says, in verse 21, "And don't turn to the left or to the right because if you turn away from the LORD, you're going to go after things that are empty, that don't profit you because they're nothing, they can't deliver you." That's idolatry. Right? Idolatry is the worship of a substitute of God - whether it's a statue or an idea or a plan or a king or a theory or a political system. "Oh, that'll be our savior." No. It won't be. God doesn't share those things. Those are empty things in God's sight.

He says, in verse 22, "For the LORD won't forsake His people." God is true to His reputation and to His Word. He is faithful to watch you and to care. He said, in

Deuteronomy 31:6, "I'll never leave you or forsake you." That's a pretty good promise! God won't leave us. He'll be there. He is faithful even when we're not. It's 2 Timothy 2:13 that says, "If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself." You can always trust God will be there. So, two promises - He's pleased to call you His people, He'll finish the work that He began. I read, "He's pleased to call you His people," and I look at all of the things I've read up to this point and go, "Why?" Right? I don't get it. I don't get why He chose the apostles. I don't get why He chose you. I totally get why He chose me. (Laughing) Who else is gonna have me? We're kind of proverbial kids that only a parent could love, aren't we? I mean, the LORD looks at us, and nobody can.....oh, that's awful. "Those are Mine." That's exactly what I read here. God has decided He's pleased to make you His own. He's pleased. He's not obligated. He's pleased. And it blows my mind that you are God's choice, you're the apple of His eye. It pleases Him.

And then Samuel said, verse 23, " 'Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you; but I will teach you the good and the right way. Only fear the LORD, and serve Him in truth with all your heart; for consider what great things He has done for you. But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king.' " Wow! Samuel was not a man of prayerlessness. He didn't get even with somebody and say, "I'm not gonna pray for you no more." I'll bet he felt like it, but he realized that he couldn't. His obligation to the LORD and to His people was to pray. "If God's not throwing in the towel, neither am I." I talked to a fellow this week - this last year at Easter time, who was filling out one of those prayer slips that we pass around and pray for each other's family and all, and he said, "I'm handing this in for the ninth year." I said, "All right." He said, "Same names are on it." I said, "Would you like me to get someone else to pray?" (Laughing) And he goes, "I don't know if the LORD's really even gonna listen." I said, "Do you think He gave up on 'em?" He goes, "No." And I said, "Well, then, how can you?! So even fifteen more years of puttin' their name on it, you just keep prayin'. God forbid that you should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray." He's not quitting. Neither should you. And I'll tell you - this comes from a man, Samuel, who had taught the word of God faithfully, and only a few listened, for sixty years. I think the hardest thing is faith. Getting the answers to prayer is easy. I love those! I love the verse that says, "While the prayer was in their mouth, the LORD answered" (Isaiah 65:24). I just don't see that very often. I find it; I know where the verse is. Eternal faith and optimism in the LORD should be found amongst God's people. Even prayer, though, and good teaching from Samuel could not make a willing response to fear the LORD and walk

in His ways from the people. "So consider it. Consider it," he says. "Let His past dealings motivate you to love Him because He first loved you."

And then he sums it all up in verses 24 and 25. "You trust the LORD, you'll be fine. You don't, you and your confidence in your king and your tall guy, it's gonna end." Where does your strength lie? Learn that tonight. Where does your strength lie? It lies with God, doesn't it? He's faithful.

Next week, chapter 13. We're gonna jump ahead. Wait! Ready? Two years. And we'll go with Saul and find out how he's doing next time.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson  
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