

St John's Church, Blackheath

The first book of Samuel

Who is the true king?

Reading Plan: September to December 2018

Introduction

Between the beginning of September and the beginning of December this year, in our Sunday sermons, we will be looking at the first book of Samuel. This contains some of the most memorable stories in the Bible, including the stories of God granting Hannah's prayer for a child, the "Witch of Endor" and, most famous of all, David and Goliath.

We can learn a lot from these stories taken in isolation. However, there is a danger that we fail to see their context and thus fail to see the big picture. In particular, there is a danger that we focus solely on the individuals involved and thus believe that the significance of what we are reading relates solely to our individual relationships with God and our personal behaviour. We may fail to notice that the significance extends beyond this: we are being taught about God himself, what he was doing in the history of the Israelite people and, beyond that, what he would be doing for all people in the future (what is sometimes called "Salvation History").

If we avoid the dangers, we can learn a lot from 1 Samuel. It is a key part of God's revelation of himself and his purposes and it is written in an engaging style, which makes it enjoyable to read and eminently memorable.

We will be looking at it in both our morning and our evening services. However, because of our All Age services in the morning and O2Q and Unplugged services in the evening, the morning service will on occasions be a week behind the evening service and will then catch up.

This reading plan is designed to accompany the sermon series. It follows the pattern of the evening services but, whichever service you attend, the passages for the week in the reading plan will relate either to the part of 1 Samuel that was the subject of the sermon on the previous Sunday or the part that will be the subject of the sermon on the next Sunday.

It would be good to ensure that you hear at least one of our sermons on each passage. Hence, if you are not able to come to the services on a particular Sunday, it would be worth listening to one (or both!) of the sermons at some time during the following week. All of our sermons are available on the Church website (<http://www.stjohnsblackheath.org.uk>). They are normally posted within a few days after being given.

The Appendix (on pages 58 to 64) describes the historical background to 1 Samuel and its geographical setting. It also gives some information about the nature of the book and some brief notes on various issues that come up on a number of occasions in 1 Samuel and may raise questions. You may find it helpful at least to glance over the Appendix before starting the reading plan so that you know what is in it and can consult it as needed.

In any event, I suggest that each day you:

- Pray that God would enable you to understand the part of 1 Samuel that you will be looking at and how it applies to you and would use it to change the way that you live your life;
- Read the passage set for the day and then the relevant notes;
- Prayerfully reflect on what the passage is saying, considering the questions set out in italics at the end of the notes for the day;
- Again, pray: thank God for the things that you have read about; ask that he would enable you to absorb what you have learned about him; say sorry for anything that the passage indicates that you should have done which you have not done (or vice versa); and seek the help of the Holy Spirit to do better in the future.

1 Samuel contains a number of things that may challenge your view of the world and of God. You may find some parts of it difficult to understand, uncomfortable or even worrying. If so, don't simply ignore the issue and move on. Take a note of it and then discuss it with others. For example, you could raise the matter in your small group or you could talk to a member of the Preachers' & Leaders' Team. It is only by doing this that we allow God, through the Bible, to change us.

My prayer is that, through studying 1 Samuel, we will all gain a deeper understanding of God and his way of working and, specifically, of how he has acted in the world, pre-eminently in Jesus.

Richard Godden, 3 August 2018

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Overview of the sermon series

Our sermons on 1 Samuel between September and December will be as follows:

Date	Sunday morning service	Sunday evening service
2 nd Sept	A son is born 1 Samuel 1:1-2:11	A son is born 1 Samuel 1:1-2:11
9 th Sept	God's voice is heard 1 Samuel 2:12-4:1a	God's voice is heard 1 Samuel 2:12-4:1a
16 th Sept	All Age Service	The presence of God 1 Samuel 4:1b-7:17
23 rd Sept	The presence of God 1 Samuel 4:1b-7:17	God's rule is rejected 1 Samuel 8:1-11:15
30 th Sept	God's rule is rejected 1 Samuel 8:1-11:15	Unplugged Service
7 th Oct	Saul is rejected 1 Samuel 12:1-15:35	Saul is rejected 1 Samuel 12:1-15:35
14 th Oct	Two warriors 1 Samuel 16:1-17:58	Two warriors 1 Samuel 16:1-17:58
21 st Oct	All Age Service	Two experiences 1 Samuel 18:1-20:42
28 th Oct	Two experiences 1 Samuel 18:1-20:42	O2Q Service
4 th Nov	Two kings 1 Samuel 21:1-23:29	Two kings 1 Samuel 21:1-23:29
11 th Nov	Remembrance Sunday	Remembrance Sunday
18 th Nov	All Age Service	Two ways to live 1 Samuel 24:1-26:25
25 th Nov	Two ways to live 1 Samuel 24:1-26:25	Unplugged Service
2 nd Dec	Two destinies 1 Samuel 27:1-31:13	Two destinies 1 Samuel 27:1-31:13

As indicated in the Introduction, you will find that, whichever service you attend, the passages for the week in the reading plan comprise either the part of 1 Samuel that was the subject of the sermon on the previous Sunday or the part that will be the subject of the sermon on the next Sunday. The last day of the reading plan is 30th November.

Overview of the reading plan

Week 1		Week 7	
Monday	1 Samuel 1:1-8	Monday	1 Samuel 16:1-13
Tuesday	1 Samuel 1:9-28	Tuesday	1 Samuel 16:14-23
Wednesday	1 Samuel 1:9-28	Wednesday	1 Samuel 17:1-58
Thursday	1 Samuel 2:1-11	Thursday	1 Samuel 17:1-58
Friday	Luke 1:46-55	Friday	1 Cor 1:18-2:5
Week 2		Week 8	
Monday	1 Samuel 2:12-26	Monday	1 Samuel 18:1-30
Tuesday	1 Samuel 2:27-36	Tuesday	1 Samuel 19:1-24
Wednesday	1 Samuel 2:27-36	Wednesday	Psalms 59
Thursday	1 Samuel 3:1-4:1a	Thursday	1 Samuel 20:1-42
Friday	Jeremiah 1:1-19	Friday	Isaiah 54:1-10
Week 3		Week 9	
Monday	1 Samuel 4:1b-11	Monday	1 Samuel 21:1-22:5
Tuesday	1 Samuel 4:12-22	Tuesday	Psalms 34
Wednesday	1 Samuel 5:1-12	Wednesday	Psalms 57
Thursday	1 Samuel 6:1-7:1	Thursday	1 Samuel 22:6-23
Friday	1 Samuel 7:2-17	Friday	1 Samuel 23:1-29
Week 4		Weeks 10/11	Weeks off?
Monday	1 Samuel 8:1-22	Week 12	
Tuesday	1 Samuel 9:1-25	Monday	1 Samuel 24:1-22
Wednesday	1 Samuel 9:26-10:27	Tuesday	1 Samuel 25:1-44
Thursday	Deut 17:14-20	Wednesday	Psalms 33
Friday	1 Samuel 11:1-15	Thursday	1 Samuel 26:1-25
Week 5	Week off?	Friday	Jeremiah 33:14-26
Week 6		Week 13	
Monday	1 Samuel 12:1-25	Monday	1 Samuel 27:1-28:2
Tuesday	1 Samuel 13:1-14	Tuesday	1 Samuel 28:3-25
Wednesday	1 Samuel 13:15-14:23	Wednesday	1 Samuel 29:1-30:31
Thursday	1 Samuel 14:24-52	Thursday	1 Samuel 31:1-13
Friday	1 Samuel 15:1-35	Friday	1 Samuel 2:1-10

Week 1 (3rd September to 7th September)

A son is born

Note: If you haven't yet read the introduction to this reading plan, would you do so now? It contains an explanation of how the plan should be used.

Monday: 1 Samuel 1:1-8

On its surface, the story of Hannah is a wonderful story of God's faithfulness to an individual and we can learn a lot by focussing on this. We are given a considerable amount of personal and circumstantial detail, from Elkanah's genealogy (v.1) to the description of Hannah's suffering (vv.6-7) and the lack of success of Elkanah's well-meaning but ham-fisted attempts to comfort her (vv.8-9). We can sympathise with Hannah's plight and, if we are thinking more sociologically, note that polygamy was at least the superficial cause of it.

But why does the Bible tell us about this particular woman's situation? And (looking ahead to tomorrow's passage) why does it tell us about the birth of Samuel and not the birth of either Saul or David? It only gives us detailed accounts of the births of three people: Moses, Samuel and Jesus. How does Samuel fit in that company?

Today's passage gives us a hint of the answers to these questions. It refers to Elkanah sacrificing to "*the LORD Almighty*" (v.3). Literally, the original Hebrew says "*YHWH of hosts*". It uses the covenant name of God (YHWH, normally vocalised "*Yahweh*"; see paragraph 4.1 in the "*General notes*" on page 63 below) and the term "*of hosts*" (Hebrew "*Sabaoth*", referring to God's lordship over the whole of creation animate and inanimate, including heavenly beings and his covenant people). It thus points to the fact that the birth of Samuel was something to do with God's sovereign action in the fulfilment of his covenant with his people. We shall see what this comprised in coming weeks but, for the moment, we should simply note that this story has far more than mere personal significance.

1. *Reflect on the name "the LORD". What does it convey about God?*
2. *Now think about the title "the LORD of hosts". What extra does this convey about God and the world?*

Tuesday: 1 Samuel 1:9-28

At the beginning of the eleventh century BC, the central Israelite sanctuary was at Shiloh. The “tent of meeting” (see Exodus 26ff) was there (perhaps by then within a permanent enclosure) and it contained the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 25:16). Elkanah went to Shiloh to sacrifice (v.3) and Hannah took the opportunity to pray fervently (vv.10 and 15).

It is likely that her motives were mixed. Verse 11 and her later prayer (Ch.2 v.1) suggests that she wanted vindication in relation to Peninnah as much as a son. However, no-one can doubt her faith. She knew that only God could give her a son and so she passionately asked for one.

Yesterday’s passage told us that *“the LORD had closed her womb”* (Ch.1 v.5). Sometimes, when we pray, we may be reluctant to recognise God’s hand in things we don’t like since it may sound as though we are charging God with wrongdoing. This is understandable but muddled: God is omniscient (all seeing) and omnipotent (all powerful) and so if Hannah could not conceive then, whatever the medical or personal reason, God was at least allowing this situation and the only person to whom an appeal for change could be made was him. Hannah recognised this in relation to her life. Later in 1 Samuel, we shall see the application of the same principle at a national level and in the fulfilment of God’s purpose in salvation.

Eli spoke as a prophet to Hannah (v.17) and Hannah accepted this with joy (v.18). Then, consistent with her previous faith, once Samuel was born, she acknowledged that the birth was God’s doing (v.20). There may well also have been a medical explanation for the birth but there is never a conflict between the existence of a natural explanation for something and the overruling of God in the world. Once again, 1 Samuel will show us that this applies far beyond the personal level.

1. *Can you accept that God is working even in things that seem bad in your life? Think of examples and pray about them (c.f. 2 Cor 12:7-10).*
2. *Think of situations in which God has provided what you desired and thank him for this. If you can’t think of any, ask God to open your eyes!*

Wednesday: 1 Samuel 1:9-28

Let's look again at yesterday's passage. Hannah vowed that if God would give her a son then she would give him back to God (v.11) and she fulfilled this once she had weaned him (which, in the ancient Near East, occurred between the ages of two and four; v23c). Her husband (who could have annulled her vow, Numbers 30:13) supported her (v.23a/b).

Modern parents may find it hard to relate to this: Hannah and Elkanah handed Samuel over to be brought up in the sanctuary; they appear only to have visited him annually (Ch.2 v.19). Questions about what might have been best for Samuel (let alone the loss to the parents) may come to mind. But we need to examine our attitudes and ask whether they are truly in line with God's will rather than merely conformed to the thinking of the world.

First, we should not forget that God called on his people to give their first fruits to him by sacrificing first born animals and by sacrificing animal in the place of first born sons, thus "redeeming" them (Exodus 13:11-13). Of course, since Jesus's perfect sacrifice, such sacrifices are no longer required but the principle of giving to God before ourselves remains. We should certainly not regard our children as belonging to us rather than God.

And what about Samuel? Who are we to judge whether or not he would have been better off living with his parents? There is a danger that we have been so affected by worldly philosophies, which are based on a narrow concept of securing happiness, that we forget that the most important thing for every person (including our children) is that they live lives that fulfil God's purposes for them. That is the way to true human fulfilment.

God granted Hannah's request for a son, knowing of her vow and knowing of his purpose for Samuel. He works in all things for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28) and he doubtless did so in the life of Samuel. Surprising though some may find it, the best thing for him was to be brought up away from his parents. As we shall discover, even from his childhood, he was living a fulfilled life.

Are you happy to follow what the Bible indicates that God requires even if it goes against your personal desires and current western philosophies? Why or why not? Think of examples and pray about them.

Thursday: 1 Samuel 2:1-11

The Bible does not tell us whether Hannah composed the song that is recorded in today's passage or whether she used a pre-existing song (perhaps one that was used in the sanctuary at Shiloh). It doesn't matter: the key thing is the sentiments that she used the song to express.

The song could be used as a prologue to the rest of the book of Samuel: it sets out the key themes that we will encounter time and again in coming weeks. Furthermore, Hannah clearly recognised that her experience was merely an example at a personal level of God's ordering of the world and that it represented a small piece in a much larger picture.

She begins by expressing her joy in God's vindication of her (v.1b/c) but then immediately moves on to the bigger themes: God is holy and incomparable (v.2; note the unequivocal monotheism, which was in stark contrast to the polytheism of the peoples surrounding the Israelites); he is a "Rock" (v.2c; solid and reliable, a source of security; see Deuteronomy 32:3-4); he judges "the ends of the earth" (vv.3/10b); he reverses people's fortunes such that appearances may be deceptive (vv.4-8b); he is sovereign over everything (v.8c-d); so the key issue for people is not whether they are strong or weak but whether they are one of God's people (vv.9-10).

The song's link between the personal and the national (and the supra-national) is clearly seen by comparing v.1 with v.10: in v.1, Hannah asserts that her "horn" has been "lifted high"; in v.10, she asserts that the "horn" of the king will be "exalted". The term "horn" is often a metaphor for strength and honour and Hannah was asserting that, although in humble circumstances, she had been granted strength and honour by God and that, in this respect, she was in no different a position from the king that Moses had recognised would one day rule over Israel (see Deuteronomy 17:14-20).

That rule lay many years in the future. For the moment, Hannah left her son in the care of the sanctuary as a trainee priest (v.11).

1. *What do you consider to be the most important statement in Hannah's song from the point of view of her as an individual? What about you?*
2. *What is the most important from the point of view of the future of the Israelite people and, indeed, God's people as a whole through history?*

Friday: Luke 1:46-55

The situation of Mary, the mother of Jesus, was very different from that of Hannah: Hannah was long married and unable to conceive whereas Mary was unmarried; Hannah had sought help from God and God had responded whereas Mary had not presented any need to God. Nonetheless, Mary used a song that expressed sentiments that are similar to those which Hannah had expressed in her song (with which Mary was probably familiar).

As in the case of Hannah, we don't know whether Mary composed her song or borrowed a pre-existing song (perhaps provided by Zechariah the priest while Mary was staying with Elizabeth and him, Luke 1:39-40). Once again it does not matter. What matters is the content.

Like Hannah, Mary starts by praising God for what he has done for her personally in giving her public honour (v.48; looking beyond the immediate potential for scandal in relation to her pregnancy). She then moves swiftly on to the bigger picture: God is mighty and holy (v.49); he judges people's actions and, indeed, thoughts (v.51b); he reverses people's fortunes (v.52-53); he is always faithful to his people (vv.50 and 54-55) and, in particular, he fulfils his promises (v.55b). The issue, therefore, is not whether we are strong or powerful in worldly terms but whether we are among those "*who fear him*" (v.50).

The similarities between the songs of Hannah and Mary are not merely a reflection of the fact that they are both about the same sovereign God. There are important links between what God was doing at the time of Samuel and what he was doing at the time of Christ. Samuel was to anoint King David, the earthly king who was to save the Israelites from their physical enemies; Mary gave birth to Jesus, the heavenly king who came to save us all from our spiritual enemies (Colossians 2:15). Jesus is a king in the line of David (see, for example, Isaiah 16:5 and Acts 2:29-31).

1. *Hannah was delighted that God had vindicated her in the eyes of other people by giving her a son. What was the main cause of Mary's joy?*
2. *How is the birth of Jesus linked with the things mentioned in vv.51-55?*

Week 2 (10th September to 14th September)

God's voice is heard

Monday: 1 Samuel 2:12-26

We tend to remember the pleasant stories in 1 Samuel and forget the unpleasant ones but we need to learn from both. Translating the Hebrew original literally, today's passage begins by stating that *"The sons of Eli were sons of Belial"* (an expression of unknown origin meaning "very wicked"). They used their position as priests in order to commit extortion (vv.13-16) and get sexual gratification (v.22; the women were *not* engaged in cult prostitution, a Canaanite practice prohibited among the Israelites).

At one level, this behaviour was a sin against those whom they exploited but that was not the worst aspect of it: the worst aspect was that they were committing a grave sin against God (vv.17/25). Whenever we break God's law we sin against him (see, for example, Psalm 51:4) but the issue is even more grave when we exploit a position in which we are held out as servants of God. Eli's sons were *"treating the LORD's offering with contempt"* (v.17).

Sadly, there are many modern examples of similar behaviour by those claiming to be God's ministers. They disgrace God's name and there is often a temptation to try to ignore or even hide what has happened (as Eli did in the case of his sons; see Ch.3 v.13). However, the Bible does not do this. It is ruthless in exposing the sins of even those who are genuine followers of God let alone those who merely pretend to know him such as Eli's sons (who *"did not know the LORD"*, as v.12 says, translated literally).

Samuel and Hannah stand in sharp contrast to the sons of Eli. We will return to Samuel but we should note that, while the sons of Eli were offering futile sacrifices as a cover for their evil activities, Hannah had given her first son to God's service. The result was that God was honouring Hannah with more children (v.21) in the manner anticipated in her song (Ch.2 v.5).

1. *Is there anything that you have done or are doing that treats God with contempt? What are you going to do about it?*
2. *Think about what Jesus said about sacrifice (Matt 5:23-24) and Paul said about communion (1 Cor 11:17-22). Do you need to change?*

Tuesday: 1 Samuel 2:27-36

The focus now shifts to God's response to what was going on. Today, we focus on Eli's sons. Tomorrow we will consider Eli and some wider issues.

We learn that Eli's sons will die on the same day (v.34) as a punishment for the evil committed by them. Once again, this is an illustration of the principles recognised by Hannah in her song: we should not be arrogant because God weighs deeds and brings death (Ch.2 vv.3/6a).

This itself is something that should cause us to reflect deeply but we are told something even more sobering: Eli's sons *"did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the LORD's will to put them to death"* (Ch.2 v.25). This is another example of something that we have considered on several occasions in the course of St John's sermon series over the past few years. The point is not that God enjoys killing people. On the contrary, he takes *"no pleasure in the death of the wicked"* (Ezekiel 33:11) but, when we rebel against God, there comes a point when he says (in essence), *"Very well, you have decided against me; so be it, you will reap what you have sown"* and, from that point, he judges us by giving us over to the sin that we are committing such that we will not repent.

This is terrifying but the Bible never pretends that God's judgment is anything other than terrifying. The point made in relation to Eli's sons is made time and again in both the Old and the New Testaments (e.g. Exodus 9:12 and Romans 1:18-32). We must keep it in mind.

When he warned his sons about their behaviour, Eli rhetorically asked *"if a man sins against God, who will intercede for him?"* (Ch.2 v.25). It is a good question: by sinning in relation to the sacrifices, his sons were rejecting God's means of maintaining a relationship with him. Of course, we know that Christ is the means by which we can be forgiven even our sins against God; it is he who intercedes for us (1 Timothy 2:5). But this poses a question for us: what if we reject Christ? Take a look at Hebrews 2:3.

1. *Reflect on God's judgment. How might it occur in the world today?*
2. *Think about the question posed in Hebrews 2:3. How should we respond and encourage others to respond to this?*

Wednesday: 1 Samuel 2:27-36

Today's passage is the same as yesterday's since we need to think about God's judgment of Eli. Through the unnamed "*man of God*", God points to the privileges that he has bestowed upon his priests (vv.27-28; in relation to the "*ephod*" see paragraph 4.2 in the "*General notes*" on page 63). Then he challenges Eli regarding his behaviour (v.29). You may ask, how Eli had "*scorned [the LORD's] sacrifice and offering*" (v.29). The answer is that he had failed to prevent his sons from dishonouring these things. He had honoured his sons more than God (v.30).

We may see this as merely weakness on Eli's part and make excuses for him (and for others who find themselves in comparable situations) but this fails to recognise the seriousness of dishonouring God. Jesus told us that we are to put God first, even above our family and friends (Luke 14:26). Furthermore, if we are responsible for someone or in a position of authority and we fail to take action that we could have taken to deal with their dishonouring of God then we are ourselves responsible for their actions. In a secular society, there is often little that we can effectually do but we need to remember that we are called to do whatever we can.

In response to this, God first states the great principle that "*Those who honour me I will honour but those who despise me will be disdained*" (v.30b; Jesus said something similar about himself, Matthew 10:32; see also John 5:23). Applying this, God's judgment on Eli is devastating (vv.31-36).

Despite this, we are left in no doubt that God's purposes would not be thwarted. God says that he will appoint a faithful priest (v.35). We may think of Samuel but the prophecy is looking further ahead: it refers to a new line ("*house*") of priests ministering to God's "*anointed one*" (v.35). In other words, God was referring to a time when his anointed priests (Zadok and his family) would minister to his anointed kings (David and his successors). For the second time (Ch.2 v.10 being the first), we note that God is planning for a king and that what is going on is of more than personal importance.

1. *Is there a danger that you are falling into the same trap as Eli? How can you make sure that instead you honour God?*
2. *Zadok was the initial fulfilment of God's promise but he was not perfect and a further fulfilment was to come (Heb 4:14-5:10). Reflect on this.*

Thursday: 1 Samuel 3:1-4:1a

We are told that, in contrast to Eli's sons, Samuel *"continued to grow in stature and favour with the LORD and with men"* (Ch.2 v.26; note the similar comment about Jesus in Luke 2:52). By the time of the events recorded in today's passage, he was probably well on his way to growing up but he had not yet assumed his prophetic office: we are told that he *"did not yet know the LORD"* (v.7a), which here probably simply means that he had not yet experienced direct revelation from God (v.7b). This was about to change.

The contrast between Samuel and the sons of Eli is stark. Once Samuel understands that God is speaking to him, he responds in humility, as commanded by Eli, *"Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening"* (vv.9a/10b).

The message that he received was grim (vv.11-14). We sometimes hear it said that God always builds people up but this is not true: as the Bible shows us time and again, God both tears down and builds up (e.g. Micah 5:11-15; contrast Jeremiah 24:6). Samuel's ministry was to involve prophecy of both and it began (and was to end) with a negative message. His fear of passing on the message was understandable (v.15). However, through the events of the night, God had ensured that Eli knew that Samuel had a message and Samuel did not dissemble when ordered to reveal it (vv.17-18).

We need to remember this. We often find it hard to talk to people about anything to do with God but at least we can sometimes manage to talk about his love. That is good but how many times do we fail to tell people the bad news of God's judgment on their behaviour in circumstances in which we ought to do so? When we do this, we fall into the trap that Samuel would have fallen into had he failed to pass on God's message of judgment to Eli.

Eli was resigned to the condemnation of his family, recognising that it was irrevocable (v.18b). His ministry was nearly over but Samuel's was just beginning. God was acting as Hannah had stated he does (Ch.2 vv.9-10).

1. *Do you allow God to speak to you, especially through the Bible? How do you make sure that you are listening?*
2. *Are you good or bad at passing on difficult messages to other people (especially about God)? How can you improve?*

Friday: Jeremiah 1:1-19

The Bible tells us about the calling by God of various people besides Samuel including, most famously, Moses (Exodus 3) and Isaiah (Isaiah 6). We are looking at Jeremiah because we shall, in due course, look at one of his prophecies that is linked to the events of 1 Samuel.

Jeremiah tells us that God spoke to him (by what means, we don't know) and began by telling him that he had been set apart to serve God since before his conception (v.5). This was also true of Samuel and it is not unique to Old Testament prophets or "special" people. The Bible assures us that God has plans for our lives from before our births (Psalm 139:16), although most of us are not called to be prophets as Jeremiah and Samuel were.

God then told Jeremiah what his role was to be: it was to speak God's words of both judgment and redemption (vv.9-10) and it was immediately clear that the emphasis, at least initially, was to be on judgment (vv.11-16). As we observed yesterday, God tears down as well as building up (v.10) and sometimes it is the tearing down that takes centre stage.

As was the case with Moses (Exodus 4:10), Jeremiah initially pleaded that he did not know how to speak, arguing that he was "*only a child*" (which may simply mean that he was young and inexperienced; v.6). However, again as was the case with Moses, God overruled this objection (v.7). He did not promise that it would be easy for Jeremiah. Indeed, he warned of opposition (v.19) but he promised that he would be with Jeremiah and would both give him the words to say and strengthen him (vv.7/9/17-19). On that basis he told, indeed ordered, Jeremiah not to be afraid (vv.7/17).

Of course, Jeremiah had a unique role to play but God promises to be with all of his people and to give us all that we need to serve him (e.g. 2 Peter 1:3). Specifically, he promised his disciples that he would give them the right words to say when they were challenged (Matthew 10:19) and many Christians down the centuries can testify that he has done this for them.

1. *Do you ever feel unable or unworthy to speak for God? What can you learn from the call of Jeremiah that will help you to do so?*
2. *Are you fearful of speaking to others about God and, specifically, about Jesus? Again, how might the call of Jeremiah help you?*

Week 3 (17th September to 21st September)

The presence of God: lost and found

Monday: 1 Samuel 4:1b-11

The link between the events of Chapters 1 to 3 and the bigger picture that has been hinted at now starts to become clear. A number of years must have passed. We are told that *“all Israel from Dan [in the far north] to Beersheba [in the far south] recognised that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord”* (Ch.3 v.20). However, he was not yet a political leader.

We know nothing about the background to the battle described in today’s reading. We are simply told that the Israelites were badly defeated in an initial engagement (v.2; see paragraph 4.3 in the *“General notes”* on page 64 in relation to the numbers killed). They rightly attributed the defeat not to the Philistines but to God (v.3). They asked why God had caused the defeat. We know that it was because they were idolatrous and had rejected God (see Ch.7 v.3 and Ps 78:56-64) but the Israelites did not consider this possibility. Instead, they sought to use the Ark of the Covenant as if it had magical qualities: they sought to manipulate God.

The very name of the Ark and the fact that it contained the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written should have given the Israelites a clue as to their problem but they did not notice this. Instead, they assumed that the Ark’s presence guaranteed that God was on their side. This was a pagan assumption and it was shared by the Philistines, who vowed none-the-less to fight to the death (vv.6b-9). Ironically, it was the Philistines and not the Israelites who remembered the Exodus story, which should have alerted the Israelites to the need for commitment to the holy God (v.8).

Both the Israelites and the Philistines assumed that the Israelites would win the ensuing engagement but God is a free agent. As the Israelites were about to learn, he will not be manipulated by men.

1. *Do you ever treat religious things as if they had magical qualities or try to manipulate God, whether in prayer or by your behaviour?*
2. *How are you going to avoid this in the future? What is needed instead?*

Tuesday: 1 Samuel 4:12-22

Ebenezer, the site of the battle, was 20 miles from Shiloh and, as at the Battle of Marathon nearly six hundred years later, a runner took the news of the result to those waiting at home (v.12). Sadly, whereas the news from Marathon was good, the news from Ebenezer was dreadful. Eli did not flinch at the news of the defeat or of his sons' deaths but he could not cope with the loss of the Ark (v.18a). His tragedy was that, like his compatriots, he understood the externalities of religion but not the imperative of commitment to God: he saw the loss of the Ark as a disaster but, as leader of Israel (v.18c), he had failed to deal with the disaster of national apostasy.

His daughter-in-law, as she died, gave her son a name that suggested that she believed that the capture of the Ark and the death of her husband, father-in-law and brother-in-law represented God departing from Israel (v.21). But she was not right. She had misunderstood what was going on.

Having read Chapters 1 to 3, the deaths of Eli and his sons will not have surprised us: God was punishing them for their rebellion against him (Ch.2 vv.30-34). What is more, their situation was symptomatic of the situation of the Israelites as a whole: they had also rebelled against God and God was punishing them for this. Yet God had certainly not departed from Israel. We already know that he had declared his purpose for the future of Israel, which involved him anointing kings and priests (Ch.2 v.35).

And what about the capture of the Ark? As we shall see, God's honour could be protected without the Ark remaining in Israel and he needed to teach his people a lesson: they were to rely on him, not symbols of his presence; and they were to act in accordance with the realities that these symbols represented, notably the fact that he is a holy God and demands holiness. He was still with the Israelites and, as we know, had placed his servant Samuel in a key position from which national regeneration could begin. However, for the time being, his presence was manifest in judgment.

1. *What do the events at Ebenezer suggest about how God might deal with the Church when it departs from his ways?*
2. *How should we, as members of St John's, make sure that we do not fall under God's judgment?*

Wednesday: 1 Samuel 5:1-12

The Philistines were polytheists. As such, they did not doubt the existence of Yahweh, the God of Israel. As we have seen, they feared him (Ch.4 v.8). However, they concluded that the result of the Battle of Ebenezer was a victory for their supreme god, Dagon, over Yahweh. They thus took the Ark of the Covenant to the temple at Ashdod, a coastal town some 40 miles from Ebenezer (vv.1-2). What followed showed how wrong they were.

First, something very strange happened in the temple: the statue fell down beside the Ark of the Covenant (v.3). This might have been an unfortunate accident but, when it happened a second time, its significance was clear, especially since this time the statue was smashed to pieces like a vanquished enemy (v.4).

Worse was to follow. A plague hit the Philistine towns (v.6). Attempts have been made to identify this (perhaps, bubonic plague) but the evidence is insufficient to do so and, in any event, the precise disease is irrelevant. The key point is that God lay behind the plague (v.6). The Philistines recognised this (v.7) but, being polytheists, they did not abandon their belief in Dagon or draw the conclusion that they should follow the LORD. They concluded that they had removed a powerful god from his locality and they were paying the consequences (v.11). They were right that they were paying the consequences of their actions but their view of the LORD as merely the tribal "*God of Israel*" (v.11) was hopelessly wrong: The Ark was "*the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts*" (Ch.4 v.4; see Monday of Week 1).

What was being demonstrated was that the Israelite defeat at Ebenezer was not a defeat for God by either Dagon or any other god of the Philistines or by the Philistines themselves. The person responsible for the result of that battle, including the capture of the Ark, was God himself. Dagon was nothing. The picture of Philistine religion painted in today's reading is reminiscent of Isaiah's much later parody of pagan religion in general (see Isaiah 44:9-20). God was in control.

1. *When might you confuse a situation in which you or other Christians have suffered for a defeat of God? How can you guard against this?*
2. *Do you recognise God's total control as portrayed in today's reading? What are the implications of this today?*

Thursday: 1 Samuel 6:1-7:1

The Philistines were clearly impressed by the things that they had heard of God's rescue of his people from Egypt (v.6; see also Ch.4 v.8). They decided that they needed to do what it appeared that God was demanding and, in some way, propitiate him (vv.4-5), their efforts being of a characteristically pagan nature (modelling the things that were afflicting them).

That said, some of the Philistines were clearly still doubtful about God's role and so they executed a plan in which untrained cows would put in a position in which they could either return to their calves (their natural instinct) or run towards Israelite country (vv.7-11). The aim was to test whether God was behind what had happened and the result was convincing (v.12). God had been vindicated before the Philistines. What about the Israelites?

The story of the return of the Ark to Beth Shemesh is a disturbing one. What might have been a joyous occasion was in fact a disaster. The text of v.19 is corrupt and it unclear how many people were killed (the possibilities range from five from each clan in the town to 50,000!). What is clear is that God put people to death for treating the Ark of the Covenant without due respect. This may seem harsh, even capricious, but we need to recognise the context. Israel had forgotten the significance of the Ark: it was not an idol; it was a reminder of God's holiness and his call for holiness in his people. The Israelites needed clearly to understand this.

By asking "*Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God?*" (v.20), the people of Beth Shemesh showed that they had got the point but they drew the wrong conclusion when they asked that the Ark be removed (v.21). They needed to recognise both the holiness of God and the fact that he himself has made it possible for people to stand in his presence by making use of the means he has provided. Of course, the revelation to them was partial and centred on the imagery of the sacrificial system. We now have the final revelation of Jesus Christ, through faith in whom we can boldly approach our holy God (Hebrews 10:19-22).

1. *Might you fail to recognise the holiness God and treat him with cheap familiarity? When might you do this? How can you avoid it?*
2. *Conversely, is there a danger that you might be so scared of God's holiness that you are unable to relate to him? How can you avoid this?*

Friday: 1 Samuel 7:2-17

Samuel began to assume a leadership as well as a prophetic role among the Israelites. He instituted a religious reformation which probably resulted in the Israelites being in a better state spiritually than at any time since the early days of the conquest of the Promised Land under Joshua (v.4). Idolatry was largely eliminated (subsequent events suggesting that some continued away from the public eye). The shrine at Shiloh was destroyed by the Philistines (see Jeremiah 7:12-14) but the Ark stayed safely at Kiriath Jearim (vv.1-2) and people clearly were at least publicly committed to God. The events we read about in today's passage show the extent of the change.

It is unclear how long after the events of Chapter 6 these events took place. It doesn't matter. The important point is that Samuel had told the Israelites that, if they ceased their idolatry, God would rescue them from the Philistines (v.3) and the time then came for this to be put to the test.

The situation at Mizpah was superficially similar to that prior to the Battle of Ebenezer, the Philistines having invaded Israelite territory to confront the Israelites (v.7a). The difference lay in the mindset of the Israelites. At Ebenezer, they were initially confident and then, following their initial defeat, attempted to manipulate God. At Mizpah, they were fearful (v.7b) but they acknowledged their sinfulness before God (v.6b) and sought God through Samuel (v.8). They recognised the futility of relying on themselves and they had learned the lesson that no-one can manipulate God.

The result was dramatic. It is unclear whether the statement that "*the LORD thundered*" (v.10b) is to be taken literally or metaphorically. Either way, God acted as Hannah had said that he does (Ch.2 v.10). The Israelites were not passive (v.13) but there was no doubt who was responsible for the victory and the message was hammered home by Samuel naming the place "*Ebenezer*". That means, "*stone of help*". The Israelites had missed the point at the Ebenezer where they had been defeated but this time they clearly accepted that, as Samuel said, "*Thus far has the LORD helped us*" (v.12).

1. *Are you able to trust God in relation to really big things? Why or why not and what can you do to improve the situation?*
2. *Think of your life to date. Can you say "Thus far has the LORD helped me"? Give thanks for what he has done in your life.*

Week 4 (24th September to 28th September)

God's rule is rejected

Monday: 1 Samuel 8:1-22

Clearly, a long time passed between the events of Chapter 7 and those that we read about in today's passage. Samuel had become old and there was a depressing sense of déjà vu about the situation with his sons (v.3). This prompted the Israelite elders to ask Samuel to appoint a king (vv.4-5).

The ostensible reason for the request was the need for a successor to Samuel (v.5) but Samuel recognised that this was not the real reason. Israel had never had a king, so his coming death was not a reason to appoint one. The real motivation of the elders was their desire to have a king to enable the community to deal with the threats posed by the Philistines in the west (v.20 and Ch.9 v.16) and the Ammonites in the east (Ch.12 v.12). More generally, they simply wanted to conform to the societal norms of the ancient Near East (vv.5/20).

Samuel felt rejected and angry (v.6) and, left to himself, would doubtless have refused the request. He recognised, however, that he was not a free agent: he was required to do what God wanted him to do. God recognised that the request represented a rejection of him (vv.7-8). The Israelites were called upon to be different from the nations around them, not to conform to their ways (e.g. Exodus 19:6) and the request for a king implied that the Israelites had not learned the lesson of the Battle of Mizpah (Ch.7).

None-the-less, God granted the request subject to Samuel warning of its consequences (v.9). This was not simply another example of God punishing sin by giving people over to the consequences of their sinful desires. As Hannah's song (Ch.2 v.10d) and the condemnation of Eli (Ch.2 v.35) indicated, God's plans already incorporated a king as his anointed agent.

1. *Do you ever want to do things that you know are not what God desires? How do you handle these situations? Do you need to change?*
2. *Consider the fact that God had years previously incorporated into his plans the sinful request for a king. What does this tell us about his sovereignty?*

Tuesday: 1 Samuel 9:1-25

The Israelite elders may have expected the discussions with Samuel to turn immediately to who (probably from among them) should become king. However, Samuel (or, rather, God) had other plans. The elders were sent home to wait on events (Ch.8 v.22b). There was to be no doubt who was in charge even in the fulfilment of a sinful desire.

The story of the lost donkeys of Kish largely speaks for itself. We see that God was overruling in relation to a seemingly chance everyday event. The loss of donkeys was sufficiently common in the ancient Near East for it to be mentioned in an ancient Hittite law code and there was nothing unusual about Saul's search for them.

Some people take v.6 to mean that Saul did not know of Samuel but that is not a necessary implication. What appears to have happened is that Saul was on the brink of giving up but his servant urged him to consult God. To have said, "Why don't we go into the town to consult Samuel?" would have missed the point he wanted to emphasise: the key was that Samuel was "*a man of God*". In the light of subsequent events, it was slightly ominous that Saul did not think of this himself. He also appears to have been somewhat clueless about what they might give Samuel (v.7) although his servant's suggestion that some silver was the solution (about 3 grams of it) might imply that he thought that Samuel needed some kind of bribe.

Once Saul entered the town, he was swept up in events. He must have been astonished that Samuel seemed to be expecting him; Samuel's extraordinary statement that he was "*the desire of Israel*" (v.20b) hinted at great things; and being the guest of honour at the sacrificial banquet (vv.22-24) must have left him bemused. Samuel, on the other hand, was merely doing what God had commanded him to do (perhaps in a vision, hence the mention of prophets being called "seers", v.9). Although, as we shall see, his subsequent words show that he still intensely disliked the idea of appointing a king, he was obedient to God.

1. *Do you recognise that God overrules in relation to every day events? Can you think of situations in you own life in which he has done so?*
2. *Are you in practice open to the possibility that God may use everyday events for some bigger purpose than you may initially recognise?*

Wednesday: 1 Samuel 9:26-10:27

The very public honouring of Samuel that we read about yesterday was followed by a very private anointing of him (Ch.9 v.27/Ch.10 v.1). Samuel and Saul, but only them, now knew of his future role.

Samuel referred to Saul being “*anointed leader over [God’s] inheritance*” (Ch.10 v.1). The king was merely to be the head steward over God’s land and people. This idea was at the heart of Samuel’s understanding of the kingship. It remained to be seen whether it was at the heart of Saul’s.

Samuel then prophesied what would happen to Saul (vv.2-8). This provided confirmation of the divine origin of Saul’s anointing. In particular, the fact that the three men going to worship at Bethel would offer Saul some bread set aside for an offering would imply that he was especially honoured.

The story of Saul joining the prophets of Gibeah is hard to comprehend. It is even difficult to know what the prophets were actually doing! Many people make assumptions about this but the Bible does not tell us. What it does indicate is that this was an indication that God was with Saul (v.10) and also that at least some of the people had reservations about what was going on (v.12). The precise meaning of the proverb, “*Is Saul also among the prophets?*” (vv.11/12) is also unclear but subsequent events were to give the question a particular poignancy. For the moment, however, we know that God was acting through and, indeed, in Saul (see v.9).

Having identified Saul, Samuel then called the people together (v.17). He could not resist again haranguing them about the sinfulness of their request for a king but he then went ahead with a process of revealing the king by lot (as a further demonstration of the fact that it was God not men who was making the selection). Surprisingly, Saul hid (v.22b). This might have been mere humility but it raised questions about his suitability for the task ahead and there were decidedly different opinions about him (vv.26/27).

1. *Has God ever given you confirmation of his calling of you in relation to particular matters? In any event, pray that, by whatever means, he would give you assurance of his will in relation to your service of him.*
2. *Do you recognise that God equips you for the tasks that he gives you to do? Ask him to show you how he has done this and thank him for it.*

Thursday: Deuteronomy 17:14-20

At the end of yesterday's reading, we are told that *"Samuel explained to the people the regulations of the kingship"* (Ch.10 v.25). We don't know what these were but they probably followed closely the rules set out in today's reading. They are worth considering because they represent the ultimate origin of our modern concept of the Rule of Law.

The requirements of a king are that: he is to be chosen by God (v.15a); he is to be one of God's people (one of the *"brothers"*, v.15b); he must not use his position to secure wealth or a harem or to reduce people to slavery (vv.16-17); he is to be subject to God's law and to work on knowing and applying it (vv.18-19); and he is not to consider himself better than the other people (v.20a). In short, the king is not above the law; he is simply a person who has been appointed by God to perform a particular role and who is responsible to God in respect of that role.

As we shall see, despite Samuel reminding Saul that he was appointed by God (Ch.15 v.1), Saul failed to accept these requirements and, throughout history, kings have liked the idea of God's anointing but ignored the other aspects of today's passage. This gave rise to royal absolutism (the *"Divine right of kings"*) and, in England, to Charles I saying (on the scaffold) that *"A subject and a sovereign are clean different things"*, which is a profound misunderstanding of the Biblical concept of kingship.

Powerful kings are rare today but Deuteronomy 17 is still important since the same principles apply to all authorities. Even Christians often talk as if all we need for good government is democracy but a democracy which does not accept that all governments are subject to the law (primarily God's law but the secular law as well) will be little more than an elected dictatorship and will be likely to be plagued by self-interest and corruption. It is unrealistic today to expect most governments to acknowledge God but we should still pursue the Rule of Law, although the question whether it can survive without the acknowledgement of God remains open.

1. *How can Christians promote the Rule of Law in the UK today? How might we unintentionally subvert it?*
2. *Do you recognise that you are under God's authority when you exercise earthly authority? How can you apply the principles in today's passage?*

Friday: 1 Samuel 11:1-15

After being publicly revealed as king, Saul “went to his home in Gibeah”, which was very close to Mizpah where the meeting in Ch.10 took place (Ch.10 v.26). You might find it extraordinary that he did this and that we next hear of him ploughing (v.5). But what was he supposed to do? He had no palace (although archaeologists have found what appears to be one that he built later) and it must have been difficult even to house and feed the retainers who followed him back to Gibeah (Ch.10 v.26). It would take time for a proper royal household, administration and army to emerge.

Jabesh Gilead was across the Jordan over 40 miles north of Gibeah. It was slightly cut off from the Israelite heartlands and must have felt vulnerable. It clearly could not hold off the Ammonite king for long. Hence, in accordance with a practice that has been employed on many occasions over the course of history, the inhabitants did a deal with the attacking king: he would hold off his attack for seven days and, if at the end of that period no-one had come to rescue them, they would surrender (v.3).

The seven days was only just enough for Saul to raise an army (v.10) but he managed to do so (v.8; see paragraph 4.3 in the “General notes” on page 64 regarding the numbers involved). The result was an overwhelming victory for Saul and the Israelites (v.11), which led to people uniting behind him and the confirmation of his kingship (v.15).

All of this can be described, as above, in entirely secular terms: a new king established his credentials and secured his position on the throne by winning a victory over an external enemy. However, the key to today’s passage is in v.6: “When Saul heard [the people’s] words, the Spirit of God came upon him in power”. The Spirit of God had been with him when he returned from seeing Samuel such that he “prophesied” (Ch.10 v.10) but the presence of God’s Spirit was not (and is not) merely something related to religious or emotional experiences. Saul needed the presence of the Spirit to do what he was required to do as king and, specifically, to be a military leader. We likewise need God’s Spirit to live our lives as God desires.

1. Do you seek to serve God in your every day life (e.g. your job)? If not, why not? If so, how do you go about it?
2. Do you recognise that you need God’s Spirit for this? Pray for this now.

Week 5 (1st October to 5th October)

A week off?

Our morning service on 16th September being an All Age service and the evening service on 30th September being an Unplugged service, this reading plan will get ahead of the sermon series if we don't pause. So, there is no new part of 1 Samuel to consider this week and you can take a week off from this reading plan.

That said, you may have found that there has been a lot to absorb in what you have read in the past four weeks and you may find it helpful to go back over the first 11 Chapters of 1 Samuel and think further about them. You may even have a bit of catching up to do!

You could also consider further some of the things that we have been thinking about or prepare for what is coming up. For example:

- (i) If you would like to read a bit more of the background to 1 Samuel, you could read Chapters 17 to 21 (or even 13 to 21) of the book of Judges, which describe events that overlap chronologically with the events described in the first three chapters of 1 Samuel.
- (ii) In preparation for David's appearance in coming weeks, you could read the book of Ruth (Ruth being one of David's great-grandmothers).
- (iii) You could read the book of Lamentations or, at least, Chapter 3 of that book. This would enable you to think further about the way in which God sometimes brings disaster and how this relates to his love of his people. This book was written following the destruction of Jerusalem after a long siege by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The consequences of the siege were dreadful and the writer (possibly Jeremiah) attributed them to God yet he also saw God's faithfulness at work (see Lamentations 3:37-39 and 3:22-24, respectively).

Week 6 (8th October to 12th October)

Saul is rejected

Monday: 1 Samuel 12:1-25

Our Church Bibles head today's passage, "*Samuel's Farewell Speech*" but that is misleading. Samuel was handing over political leadership to Saul as the new king but he was to continue as a prophet for some years.

Samuel may have given his speech immediately after the confirmation of Saul as king (although this is not stated). He began by confirming that the people had no complaints about his conduct as their leader (vv.3-5), which then enabled him to launch into an attack on the conduct of the people. In part, this comprised a repetition of his anger that they had demanded a king (vv.12/17) but its scope was far wider than this: Samuel also pointed out all the things that God had done for them over the course of the centuries since they were slaves in Egypt (his "*righteous acts*", v.7); and he drew attention to their lack of gratitude (vv.9-11) including, specifically, their apostasy since entering the promised land (v.10). A spectacular unseasonal thunderstorm (which may have destroyed crops) provided a demonstration of God's power over nature and endorsed what Samuel had said (vv.16-18).

Despite this, Samuel's message was not a negative one: his main purpose was to demonstrate God's unwavering faithfulness and willingness to forgive and bless the people despite their behaviour. He warned them that, if they persisted in doing evil, God's "*hand*" would be "*against them*" (v.15) and they would be "*swept away*" (v.25). However, he said "*Do not be afraid*" (v.20) and he urged the people to "*consider what great things [God] has done for you*" (v.24), to reject "*useless idols*" (v.21) and "*fear the LORD and serve and obey him*" (v.14). They were not to descend into craven fear since all was not lost but they were to have appropriate reverent fear in the face of God's omnipotence, omniscience, holiness and righteousness.

1. *Do you reflect upon God's "righteous acts" both as recorded in the Bible and in your own life? Do so now and thank God for them.*
2. *Do you understand the difference between craven fear and the fear of God required of us? Ask that God would help you manifest the latter.*

Tuesday: 1 Samuel 13:1-14

Today's passage suffers from serious textual problems: v.1 is corrupt and it is impossible to work out what it is saying (the words "thirty" and "forty" are not in the Hebrew) and the translators of our Church Bibles have simply guessed what the author said; it is impossible to be sure what command Saul breached (see v.13), not least since the relationship between the reference to "the time set by Samuel" in v.8 and Samuel's command in Ch.10 v.8 (given some years earlier) is unclear; and there are doubts as to various points of detail (e.g. the term "Hebrews" in vv.3/7 may refer to all Israelites, Israelites who had defected to the Philistines or something else).

In the face of this, it would be easy to move swiftly on to later chapters. However, we should not do so. The problems don't impact the key points that the passage is making. It is beginning the story of the failure of Saul.

Saul was understandably concerned about the situation that developed following his son Jonathan's attack on the Philistine outpost at Geba (v.3): The Philistines had mustered an army far bigger than his own; his men were scared and began deserting (vv.5-8). He was also religious: he decided to hold a sacrifice prior to doing battle with the Philistines (v.9); as he put it, he "sought the LORD's favour" (v.12). What could be wrong with that?

First, what was the motive for the sacrifice? It looks like an attempt to win God's favour by means of religious observance and thus to manipulate God as the Israelites had attempted to do at Ebenezer (Ch.4). Secondly and even more seriously, it was contrary to God's command (whatever that was precisely, v.13); Saul had given way to fear instead of showing faith.

God's response was to declare, in essence, that Saul would not establish a dynasty (v.14). We may at first consider this to be a bit harsh for a single failure to show faith but that failure showed that Saul was not going to be a king who would consistently do the things required by God (Ch.12 v.14). Subsequent events reinforced this conclusion.

1. *Do you ever seek to win God's favour by religious observance? What is wrong with this? How can you avoid the problem?*
2. *Do you sometimes feel that God's judgment on someone is harsh? If so, ask him to give you his perspective on the relevant situations?*

Wednesday: 1 Samuel 13:15-14:23

In human and technological terms, Saul was in a seriously bad position. Following defections (Ch.13 v.8), he was left with only 600 men (v.15) and they had few weapons (vv.19-22). He retreated to his capital at Gibeah and showed his concern by counting his men (v.15). There is no sign that he had understood the significance of Samuel's challenge to him (v.13). He had even appointed a member of Eli's family as his priest (Ch.14 v.3), which was at least questionable bearing in mind what he should have known about the history of the family. He was not showing active faith in God.

In contrast, his son Jonathan was not concerned about the number of people with him (who could easily be counted!). He knew that the only relevant question was whether or not God was with him in whatever he did. First, he raised the possibility that God might be minded to act on behalf of his people (Ch.14 v.6). Then, since he did not know whether or not this was the case, he sought to gain a sign as to whether or not God was minded to do so (vv.8-10). He thus avoided mindless and presumptuous bravado and demonstrated humble faith in God.

He then demonstrated great bravery, climbing a cliff to throw the Philistine detachment stationed at the top into confusion (v.12). Although wholly irrelevant to this reading plan, it is interesting to note that, during the First World War, there was a British army brigade major who was fighting the Turks in the Michmash area and who knew his Bible well. He worked out Jonathan's route before using it himself to pull off a surprise victory!

As often in ancient battles, panic then set in and the Philistines fled (v.15). Saul's reaction to this was odd. He had clearly brought the Ark of the Covenant to his camp (another worrying reminder of past sins of the Israelites, v.18b) and he appeared to want some guidance from God (v.18a). However, he then gave up on this and launched an attack, presumably having wasted some time along the way (v.19). At best this was dithering. At worst, it was another display of lack of understanding of God.

1. *When might you be tempted to show fear because of a lack of earthly resources? How can you distinguish realism from a lack of faith?*
2. *How can you be sure of when God is with you and thus avoid presumption? Ask God to help you in this.*

Thursday: 1 Samuel 14:24-52

Jesus demands that we should not resort to oaths (Matthew 5:33-37). This is because he wants us to tell nothing but the truth and to fulfil all our commitments, however expressed. The Bible is clear that we should normally fulfil commitments whether made to God (e.g. Ecclesiastes 5:4-5) or other people. It also shows the dangers of rash oaths.

The most famous such oath is that of Jephthah, who sacrificed his own daughter to fulfil a vow that he made on the way to battle despite God's prohibition of murder (Judges 11:29-40). That was a tragedy and, sadly, Saul appears to have been prepared to commit the same wrong by killing his son in fulfilment of his own oath (v.44).

Fortunately, Saul's troops intervened. They met Saul's oath with one of their own (v.45) and Saul backed down. He thus avoided murder but the consequences of his oath were still serious: it undermined his troops and hindered the pursuit of the Philistines (vv.29-30) and it ultimately resulted in him being humiliated in front of his men.

So why did he make his oath? We don't know. There is nothing in the Law of the Old Testament that would encourage him to make it. However, it was consistent with his religiosity and his apparent need to "do something" before God (c.f. Ch.13 v.12). He doubtless felt that he had done something praiseworthy because, through the oath, he had shown his commitment to God and he had enforced the ceremonial food laws after the battle (vv.33-35). He did not understand God's priorities. God takes no pleasure in self-imposed restrictions (Colossians 2:23) and observance of the food laws was no substitute for the true (and simple) faith in God of his son Jonathan.

In spite of Saul's disobedience, God did not remove him at once. We are told that he campaigned far and wide and was successful (vv.47-48). God acts in his own time.

1. *Have you every made unwise (even downright wrong) vows or promises? How have you handled the resulting situation? What should you have done differently?*
2. *Do you have any practices that you hope God will be particularly pleased with? Are you sure that they are in accordance with his will?*

Friday: 1 Samuel 15:1-35

Many modern readers are troubled by God's command to put to death the Amalekites (v.3). It is impossible here to do justice to this subject. Suffice to say that God has only ever issued such a command in relation to the Amalekites and, earlier during the invasion of the Promised Land, the Canaanites (Deuteronomy 20:10-18) and the Bible indicates that it was part of his judgment on the people involved (see Genesis 15:16).

The events following the attack on the Amalekites showed that, for all his religiosity, Saul was not prepared to obey God. Unlike modern readers, he had no problem with killing the Amalekites themselves other than their king (v.8). However, he saved the best of the livestock (v.9). He told Samuel that this was so that these animals could be ritually sacrificed (v.15) but this may well have been a lie and, even if it wasn't, he was disobeying God. As Samuel memorably put it, *"Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice"* (v.22). Saul never absorbed this point.

After initially claiming to have done no wrong (v.20), Saul repented when Samuel told him that as a result of his action God would remove him as king (vv.23b-24). He had shown little concern following Samuel's statement that he would not found a dynasty (Ch.13 v.14) but the new sentence caused him to beg forgiveness, even clinging on to Samuel's robe to plead with him (vv.25/27). He succeeded in persuading Samuel not to humiliate him publicly (vv.30-31) but God's decision was final and his hanging on to the robe merely supplied a symbol of what was about to happen (vv.26/28).

We are told that God *"was grieved that he had made Saul king over Israel"* (v.35b; also v.11a). We may wonder how it relates to God's omniscience and Samuel found the situation troubling (v.11b). However, he clearly saw no contradiction with the statement that God does not change his mind (v.29). What we are being told is probably that God lamented the downside of having Saul as king, even though that was necessary as part of his plan to teach the Israelites the things that they needed to understand.

1. *How might you fall into the trap Saul fell into? How can you avoid it?*
2. *What does the fact that God made Saul king even though he knew he would fail teach us about God's action in the world?*

Week 7 (15th October to 19th October)

Two warriors: David and Goliath

Monday: 1 Samuel 16:1-13

Saul's rejection by God having been recounted, 1 Samuel moves straight on to record David's anointing as his successor. This reflects 1 Samuel's focus on God's overruling. It may also reflect the chronological order of events but this is not necessarily the case. The Bible is often not concerned with chronology (e.g. the Gospels do not record the events of Jesus's life in chronological order). It is possible that David's anointing followed the events of the second half of Chapter 16 and even his confrontation with Goliath. This may explain some apparent oddities in the text.

Samuel appears to have been personally affected by the rejection of Saul. He may have felt that God had made him look silly, first anointing Saul and then rejecting him. As a result, God told him in no uncertain terms that he needed to stop mourning and anoint another king (v.1). Samuel was nervous (v.2) but, characteristically, obeyed.

The people of Bethlehem were also nervous (v.4). It may be that Samuel's rift with Saul was well known and they feared the consequences of Samuel's presence in their town. In any event, they seem to have been reconciled to his presence and participated in a sacrificial ceremony (v.5).

Even though Samuel had served God for many years, he still did not have God's mind in relation to someone's suitability to be king. He immediately thought that Eliab "looked the part" and God used this opportunity to state a crucial principle regarding his evaluation of people: "*Man looks at the outward appearance but the LORD looks at the heart*" (v.7). David was, in fact, good looking (v.12) but that was not why he was chosen. He was chosen because he was a "*man after [God's] own heart*" (Acts 13:22).

1. *Do you sometimes spend too long mourning for the past and risk not doing what God wants you to do in the present?*
2. *Do you sometimes judge by outward appearances? How can you avoid this?*

Tuesday: 1 Samuel 16:14-23

We are told that God sent an *“evil spirit”* to torment Saul (v.14). The term *“evil spirit”* may refer to a spirit that is evil or a spirit that is good but commanded to execute judgment or simply to Saul’s own spirit being troubled. Whatever is intended, the idea may not be a comfortable one, yet it is consistent with what the Bible teaches elsewhere. It tells us time and again that God may send bad things as well as good (e.g. Lamentations 3:37-38, 1 Kings 22:19-22, Amos 3:6, John 9:3 and 2 Corinthians 12:7).

We should be careful to avoid over-simplistic explanations of the link between what is happening in someone’s life and their conduct (consider the mistakes made by Job’s *“comforters”* and Jesus’s comments about the fall of the tower in Siloam, Luke 13:4). On the other hand, we should also recognise that God may send things that are not what we would want and that, in some cases, are sent by way of judgment. That was the case with Saul.

Part of God’s judgment on Saul was that, unintentionally, he was rendered dependent on David. Saul’s attendants recognised that God was with David (v.18d). Saul liked him (v.21b) and gained relief from his music (v.23). Once again, we see God overruling in a way that those involved did not suspect.

It may appear slightly odd that David was described as a *“warrior”* (v.18) since, in Chapter 17, he is described by Saul as *“only a boy”* (Ch.17 v.33). However, leaving aside the possibility that the Bible’s account is not chronological, Saul’s attendant may have merely meant that David came from the warrior class of Israel or a warrior family. The main issue is that David was the kind of person to whom Saul would be instinctively attracted.

The statement regarding David that *“the LORD is with him”* (v.18d) is a repeated refrain in this part of 1 Samuel. It was the fundamental difference between his situation and that of Saul. It points to the most important matter for any leader, indeed any person, to consider: is the LORD with me?

1. *Do you tend to thank God for the good things and attribute all the bad thing to other causes? How does 1 Samuel challenge this approach?*
2. *Is the LORD with you? How can you ensure this (noting that David was not perfect)?*

Wednesday: 1 Samuel 17:1-58

Even in a secular age, the story of David and Goliath is well known. The account of it contains a great amount of circumstantial detail, it is easy to read and it is memorable. The danger, of course, is that our familiarity results in us missing important lessons that we should learn from it.

The Battles of Mizpah and Michmash (and, doubtless, other engagements) had succeeded in pushing the Philistines out of the central hills of Israel but they still threatened Judah in the south. On the occasion that is the subject of today's reading, they had penetrated to within a little over a dozen miles of Bethlehem such that they threatened Saul's capital, Gibeah.

We know very little about how ancient battles were fought but we do know that they frequently involved psychological and other manoeuvring. One-on-one combat does not appear to have been used in the ancient Near East but the Philistines came from the Aegean, where it was used, and so it is not surprising to read of Goliath's challenge to the Israelites. He had good reason for confidence, being heavily protected with armour, armed to the teeth with iron weapons (vv.5-7) and "*over nine feet tall*" (v.4; the Church Bibles lose the precision of the original, which states that he was "*six cubits and a span*" tall: someone clearly measured him once he was dead!).

As had been the case on other occasions, Saul seemed to have no idea how to cope with the challenge. He saw the problem in entirely secular terms. David, however, did not. He saw Goliath's challenge as a blasphemous challenge to God (vv.26b/36b). Furthermore, whereas Saul thought only of what weapons and protection he had available (vv.38-39), David (like Jonathan previously, Ch.14 v.6) saw the key issue to be the presence of God (vv.37a/45-47). His bold defiance of Goliath must have appeared absurd to the Philistines (and, probably, Saul and many of his soldiers) but David had confidence not in himself but in God. And, of course, God honoured this.

1. *Are there situations in your life in which you would behave differently if you were confident that God was with you in what you propose to do?*
2. *How are you going to ensure that you gain that confidence (or change what you propose to do)?*

Thursday: 1 Samuel 17:1-58

Today's passage is the same as yesterday's. Yesterday, we looked at the confrontation between David and Goliath from the point of view of the participants and sought to draw lessons for our own lives. We need also to have a wider perspective. As we have seen over recent weeks, the main player in the events we have been considering is not Samuel or Saul, let alone Hannah or Jonathan, and it will not be David. It is God himself. This book is teaching us about the character and the acts of God.

Of course, God was acting in a particular historical context. We are not presented with a philosophical or theological treatise about God but a description of how he acted in real life situations. We see that God was (and, since he does not change, is) concerned about challenges to his authority and honour and he will do things to protect this. This is ultimately why David was right to rely on God: he was right that God's honour was at stake and that God would defend it. To put the matter another way, God was not fighting for David but for himself. We should not draw the conclusion that, if we honour God and have faith in him, he will be with us and fight our battles for us. Rather we should make sure that we have faith that manifests itself in us fighting God's battles and then rest assured that, as he did when faced with Goliath, God will act.

There is also a still larger point that we need to note. In 1 Samuel, we see God working out his plan of salvation and we know that David is what theologians call a "type" of Christ. In other words, his kingship pointed forward to Christ's perfect kingship. This does not mean that David was perfect (he certainly was not) but simply that key aspects of his life illustrate and help us understand Christ.

We can see his battle with Goliath in this light. David, acting in faith and reliance on God, took on seemingly impossible odds, overcame a powerful enemy and thus saved God's people. Who does that remind you of? Take a look at Hebrews 2:14-15.

1. *How can we recognise when God's honour is at stake (and thus that he will defend this) whilst avoiding over spiritualising situations?*
2. *Think about the comparison between David and Jesus. How does this help you to understand what Jesus did?*

Friday: 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

If you had tried to work out how to defeat the Philistines, your plans would doubtless not have included the use of an untrained youth armed with a sling and, if you had tried to work out how to defeat sin and death, your plans would doubtless not have included someone dying on a cross. But, God's plans did include these things. He has used, and continues to use, things that appear "*foolish*" to work out his plan of salvation (vv.21/23-24).

In her song, Hannah recognised that God turns the world's order upside down (1 Samuel 2:4-5/9c). Paul's statement that God "*chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are*" (v.28) expresses the same sentiment. In particular, God turns the world's wisdom upside down (vv.20/25/27). This makes clear that what is happening is the result of his power and nothing else (vv.18/24; Ch.2 v.5). Just as neither David nor any other Israelite could boast about the victory over Goliath, no-one can boast about anything to do with their salvation from sin and death (v.29).

The same issue applies to the spread of the Gospel. If you had wanted to build the Church, would you have chosen a small group of Judean disciples to take responsibility for it? Probably not, but God does not work as we might. Paul reminded his readers that few of them were anything in worldly terms (v.26) and he himself was not impressive (see 2 Corinthians 10:10). He was not eloquent or a philosopher and he did not try to be one (see Ch.2 v.1). He knew that he was called simply to proclaim the "*foolish*" message of the cross (v.2). He admitted to being nervous (v.3) but he knew that the issue was not his skill or power but the power of the Gospel itself, applied to people by the working of the Spirit in them (v.4).

And what about today? You may look at the Church (yes, even St John's) and think that, if you had been God, you would not have entrusted the Gospel to it. But the issue for us is exactly the same as it was for David, for Paul and, indeed, for Jesus himself: God turns the world on its head and we rely on his power not our own.

1. *Are you ever tempted to attribute your forgiveness and relationship with God to something to do with yourself? Be honest with yourself!*
2. *What does today's reading teach us about how we should serve God?*

Week 8 (22nd October to 26th October)

Two experiences: love and loathing

Monday: 1 Samuel 18:1-30

Although we are told that David had entered Saul's service previously (Ch.16 v.21a), since Bethlehem was not far from Gibeah, he could have gone backwards and forwards to Saul's court as required. Doubtless, many people in the king's service did not live at court. However, after the defeat of Goliath, Saul required that David stay with him (v.2).

We might assume that this was because of his appreciation of David's value but it soon becomes clear that there was a darker motive: jealousy. Saul originally loved David (Ch.16 v.21b) but the reaction of the people to David's success unsettled him (vv.6-9) and the more that other people loved David, the more that Saul loathed him as a rival (see, for example, v.15).

After trying to pin David with his spear (v.10c), he attempted more subtle ploys: first, trying to ensure David's death in an ordinary battle (v.17, a scheme that David himself later used to murder Uriah; 2 Samuel 11:14-17); then trying to get David to take risks in order to win Saul's daughter (vv.24-25). Saul seems to have believed that these indirect methods of attempted murder were somehow less culpable than direct methods (v.17b). He was of course wrong. Indeed, Jesus later pointed out that wrongful anger (the cause of murder) is itself a serious matter (Matthew 5:21-22) and that it is the thoughts of the heart that lead to murder (Matthew 15:19).

Meanwhile, David was growing in favour with everyone else: for obvious reasons, he was the people's hero (v.16) and, more surprisingly, Saul's son Jonathan and daughter Michal both loved him (vv.1/20; the word used of their affections is the same as that originally used of Saul's in Ch.16. v.21b). Like Jonathan, Saul came to recognise that the LORD was with David (v.28) but his reaction to this realisation was very different from that of his son.

1. *Do you ever suffer from jealousy? If so, be honest and pray about the issue, asking God to change you and prevent you acting wrongly.*
2. *Do you ever seek to achieve personal gain by indirect means so as to reduce your sense of guilt? Again, pray about this.*

Tuesday: 1 Samuel 19:1-24

Following the failure of his indirect methods, Saul turned to overt attempted murder. He appears for some time to have been unaware of his son, Jonathan's, devotion to David and even allowed Jonathan to extract from him a promise on oath not to kill David (v.6). Sadly, this was not worth anything and his attempts to do so soon resumed (v.9ff).

At a superficial level, it was first Jonathan, then Michal and then Samuel who saved David. Their motives were probably different and mixed. On the positive side, Jonathan was clearly a disciple of God (Ch.14 v.6) but, on the negative, Michal appears to have had "*idols*" (literally, "*teraphim*", v.13). Yet, from the point of view of the outcome, these motives did not matter. The repeated refrain that the LORD was with David (e.g. Ch.18 v.14) should alert us to the underlying cause of Saul's lack of success. This becomes express in vv.19-24. God was opposing Saul and protecting David.

Shortly after he was anointed as king, Saul "*prophesied*" (Ch.10 v.9-10). As indicated previously (see Wednesday, Week 4), the implication is that it was something positive and the people's new proverb ("*Is Saul also among the prophets?*", Ch.10 v.11) was probably an expression of pleased surprise.

The next time we hear of him prophesying, however, the prophesying occurs while he is troubled by an evil spirit (Ch.18 v.10). This time, although prompted by God's action, the implication is negative. Indeed, many modern translations use the word "*raving*" instead of "*prophesying*" even though the underlying Hebrew word is the same as that used in Chapter 10.

By the time of the events in today's passage, the situation was even worse. Once again, we are told that Saul "*prophesied*" (vv.23-24) but this time whatever happened lead to him being completely disabled for a day and a night (v.24b). The same God who has sent his Spirit to equip Saul and give a sign of his blessing had subsequently troubled Saul and then completely disabled him. The people had cause to reassess the meaning of the expression "*Is Saul also among the prophets?*" (v.24c).

1. *Do you recognise that ultimately your protection comes from God not those around you? How can you ensure that you remember this?*
2. *Reflect on what happened to Saul. Pray that you would avoid this.*

Wednesday: Psalm 59

Today's Psalm is a prayer of David. The heading indicates that it relates to the events described in 1 Samuel 19:11-17, although some parts of it may suggest that David returned to it and expanded it later when he was king.

David begins by asking for deliverance from Saul and his men (v.1). Taken alone, this might seem to be a self-centred prayer but David moves straight on to plead that those who oppose him are "*evil-doers*" (v.2; see also vv.6-7/14) and that he is innocent of wrongdoing (vv.3-4).

Sometimes we can feel uncomfortable when reading the pleas of innocence and righteousness in the Psalms. Are we not all sinners? Yes, we are (e.g. Romans 3:23) but this does not prevent us pleading that, in relation to particular matters, we are innocent and asking God to intervene.

We may also feel uncomfortable with the passion with which David urges God to deal fiercely with his enemies (vv.5/8/11-13). If so, we need to remember that the Psalms are not the prayers of people who were engaged in detached philosophical reflection. They reflect the raw feelings of people like David who were engaged in everyday situations and, especially, conflict. God tells us to talk to him about what is on our mind (Philippians 4:6) and the Psalms show us that we are entitled to be open and honest before him. After all, he already knows our innermost thoughts (Psalm 139:2).

Of course, that does not mean that David's feelings reflect a truly Christian attitude. Christ taught us to pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44) and, if God chooses to forgive them then we should not sulk like Jonah (Jonah 4:1-3) but rather rejoice. Nonetheless, we should also not be afraid to ask that God vindicate himself: if people are doing evil then we should call on him to act, in forgiveness if they repent but in judgment otherwise.

David recognised that it was not for him to take things into his own hands. He wanted God to rouse himself not simply to support him but to vindicate his justice. And he had confidence that God would do so (vv.9/16-17).

1. *Do you pray like David did in today's reading? In particular, do you ask God to rouse himself? Why or why not?*
2. *How can you be honest about your feelings before God and yet not defend feelings that you are aware are wrong?*

Thursday: 1 Samuel 20:1-42

Jonathan was in a difficult position in relation to the tension between his father and David. He owed both personal loyalty and political allegiance to his father. Furthermore, as his father pointed out to him, David was a serious threat to his prospect of being king (v.31). Yet, although he never deserted his father, he aligned himself with David. Why?

Some suggest that Jonathan had a homoerotic relationship with David but this is unsupported by the text. The word "loved" in Ch.18 v.1 is used in a wide range of contexts and the other expressions of commitment in Chapters 18-20 do not imply anything sexual, which would certainly have precluded the favourable assessment of Jonathan that 1 Samuel gives us.

At a purely personal level, Jonathan was clearly a man of action who may have found his father rather timid and pedestrian and, in contrast, seen David as a kindred spirit. However, this cannot have been the main factor in his attachment to David. We need to look elsewhere.

More significantly, whilst Saul was religious but showed no signs of active faith, Jonathan was personally committed to God (Ch.14 v.6) and he would doubtless have seen the same commitment manifest in David. However, even though this might have resulted in a natural affinity between the two men, it would not alone have ensured the commitment shown by Jonathan any more than it ensures that Christians support one another today.

The additional factor that resulted in this commitment was Jonathan's recognition that David, rather than he, was God's choice as the future king. Whether or not this is implicit in his actions when making his first covenant with David (Ch.18 v.3-4), he later expressly said as much (see Ch.23 v.17).

Both Saul and Jonathan recognised that God had designated David as Saul's successor. Saul could not accept the implications of this and fought against it, opposing God. Jonathan (despite recognising that it meant that he was not going to be king) accepted it, working with God.

1. *Are you prepared to work with God even when this appears to be against your own interests? Try to think about real situations.*
2. *We know that God was with Jonathan even though he did not intend him ever to be king. What does this teach us?*

Friday: Isaiah 54:1-10

Yesterday, we read that Jonathan asked David to show “*unfailing kindness*” to himself and his family (1 Samuel 20:14-15). The Hebrew word translated “*unfailing kindness*” is “*hesed*”. The same word is translated “*everlasting kindness*” and “*unfailing love*” in today’s passage (vv.8/10). It is difficult to translate (which is why there are many options) but the basic concept is steadfast love (particularly covenanted love) expressed in action.

As Jonathan would have known, *hesed* is a key characteristic of God (Exodus 34:6-7; it appears 246 times in the Old Testament). He was asking David to imitate God; to agree to behave towards him as God had indicated that he would behave towards David (see 2 Samuel 7:15, in which God promises his *hesed* to David; this is implicit but not express in 1 Samuel).

David agreed to Jonathan’s request and, in due course, demonstrated *hesed* to his son (see 2 Samuel 9:1-7, where our Church Bibles use the word “*kindness*”). Later, he was to acknowledge that God had also shown *hesed* to him (2 Samuel 22:51).

God’s promise of *hesed* is, of course, not limited to David: look at Isaiah 55:3 and you will see that he promises exactly the same steadfast love to all his people (“*hesed*” there being translated “*faithful love*”). Exodus 20:6 (part of the Ten Commandments) tells us that this *hesed* extends to “*a thousand generations of those who love [God]*” and our passage today assures us that it will never be shaken (v.10). It has, of course, been shown pre-eminently in the sending of Jesus, a king in the line of David, to die for us (see Isaiah 16:5, “*hesed*” being translated “*faithfulness*”). As Paul says, “*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8).

So how should we respond to this? Well, just as David was asked to respond to God’s *hesed* by showing *hesed* to Jonathan, we are required to respond to God’s *hesed* by showing *hesed* to others (Micah 6:8, “*hesed*” being translated “*mercy*”).

1. *Re-read today’s passage (noting the echoes of Hannah’s song). Do you understand and thank God for his hesed? Do so now.*
2. *How do you show hesed to others? What should you change?*

Week 9 (29th October to 2nd November)

Two kings: David and Saul

Monday: 1 Samuel 21:1-22:5

David was never to return to Saul. He initially fled a few miles to Nob (Ch.21 v.1), where the central shrine had been located since the destruction of Shiloh after the Battle of Ebenezer (see Chapter 4). There he lied to the senior priest in order to get both food (vv.2-3) and Goliath's sword, which he probably knew was at Nob despite not admitting it (v.8).

He then fled south-west to Gath, one of the major Philistine cities (v.10). Whatever his motive in doing so, he failed to secure sanctuary and ended up dissembling in order to save his life (v.13). Interestingly, the servants of the king of Gath thought that David was king of at least part of Israel (v.11).

Following his escape (or expulsion) from Gath, David went back into the southern part of Israel (Judah) towards his home town, Bethlehem (Ch.22 v.1). By this time, there were the beginnings of an uprising against Saul and many people joined David at Adullam (v.2). Unfortunately, their character was dubious: they were a band of assorted malcontents and David asked no questions of their background (v.2). He felt that he needed their protection.

That said, David was not thinking entirely of himself. In order to look after his parents, he headed out of Israel to the territory of another traditional enemy of the Israelites, the Moabites, east of the Dead Sea (v.3). One of his great grandmothers, Ruth, was from Moab and it appears that the family connection was still alive (see vv.3-4 and Ruth 4:21-22).

David also began to gather some of the more reputable people who would help him in years to come, especially the prophet Gad to whom he listened (Ch.22 v.5; see also 1 Chronicles 29:29 and 2 Chronicles 29:25). He still recognised his dependence on God.

1. *David dissembled several times. The Bible does not comment on this. Do you think David was justified in doing so? Is it ever right to lie?*
2. *David went to the territories of the enemies of his people. Would you have condemned him for this? Would you have been right to do so?*

Tuesday: Psalm 34

Today's Psalm is a proclamation of the goodness of God. Its heading indicates that it was written by David when, or more likely immediately after the time when, he pretended to be insane (i.e. while he was in Gath as recorded in 1 Samuel 21:10-15). It is odd that it refers to Abimelech rather than Achish (21:10) but it is possible that Achish was a title or throne name and that Abimelech was the personal name of the king of Gath.

David's basic message is that God saved him. Understandably, while in Gath, he had "*fears*" (v.4b) and "*troubles*" (v.6b) but he "*sought the LORD*" (v.4a) and was "*delivered*" or "*saved*" (vv.4b/6b). He must have known that he was far from perfect but he recognised that God was still with him.

He also recognised that his experience was indicative of God's character and way of dealing with people. He urges that others "*Taste and see that the LORD is good*" (v.8a). Specifically, he calls on us to "*Fear the LORD*" (v.9), to "*seek the LORD*" (v.10b) and to avoid evil (vv.12-14). He asserts that, if we fear God, we will "*lack nothing*" (vv.9-10), be delivered from our troubles (vv.17-20) and, most importantly, not be condemned (v.22).

Some may ask whether all this is really true. After all, are some Christians not persecuted, even killed, for their faith? And don't Christians often have troubles from which they do not seem to be saved?

We need to think again about the context of the Psalm. David had escaped from Gath but he remained on the run and would move from one hiding place to another for a long time before he became king. So how could he write Psalm 34? Surely the answer is that he learned to rely on God's overruling. He saw that, if he feared God, he did not need to fear those who could "merely" kill the body (Luke 12:4); he reassessed what he needed in the light of his understanding of God and saw that he lacked nothing that he really needed, even if that did not include a quiet and comfortable life.

1. *Do you think that you would have felt as David did in the situation in which he found himself? How can you grow in faith?*
2. *Although he was far from perfect David speaks of being "righteous". What did he mean by this? Take a look at vv.9/22 and (although, of course, David would not have known of it) Romans 3:21-24.*

Wednesday: Psalm 57

Today's Psalm comes from the time immediately after David's flight from Gath, when he was hiding in the cave at Adullam (1 Samuel 22:1). It must have been written around the same time as Psalm 34, which we looked at yesterday, but unlike Psalm 34 it is a prayer and its tone is very different from that of Psalm 34.

In retrospect, David's time based in the cave was the beginning of his rise to power since he began to gather a band of followers around him. However, it probably did not feel like that at the time and David's prayer reflects the high level of emotion that he must have experienced.

He recognised that his only hope was that God would help him and so he begins by asserting that he is taking refuge in God (v.1) and crying out to God for help (v.2). On this occasion, he does not assert his righteousness (contrast Psalm 59, which we looked at a week ago) but merely pleads for mercy. This does not necessarily mean that he considered that he had sinned (although his behaviour in Gath was certainly questionable). It may be that he was simply at the end of his resources and was saying, "Lord, I can't go on: help!".

That said, David does not focus on himself but God. Crucially, he acknowledges that God "*fulfils [his purpose] for me*" (v.2; the words "*his purpose*" being supplied by the Bible translators for clarity). He understood that God is sovereign, has a purpose for each one of us and will work it out in our lives. He also recognised God's steadfast love and faithfulness (v.3; again, the Hebrew original refers to "*hesed*"; see the notes for last Friday).

Because he knew these things, David was able to praise God (vv.9-10) even though, on the face of things, he was in a dire position, facing a ruthless enemy (vv.4/6). Furthermore, although his prayer begins with a heartfelt plea for help, its main request is that God glorify himself (vv.5/11). That was David's perspective on life.

1. *Do you recognise that God fulfils his purpose for you? How does that make a difference to your approach to life?*
2. *Can you praise God when in a bad situation? Why or why not? Do you need to change your approach to praising him?*

Thursday: 1 Samuel 22:6-23

While David was on the run, Saul's insecurity was increasing. He was paranoid, accusing many people of conspiring against him (vv.8/13). It also appears that his power base was shrinking since, when he appeals to his men for support, he appeals to their self-interest as "*men of Benjamin*" (v.7) (i.e. men of his own tribe rather than men of Israel in general). The other tribes may well have been deserting him.

Saul's belief that the priests had conspired against him was wrong but he was not prepared to listen to Ahimelech's defence (vv.14-15). Instead, he resorted to mindless bloodshed and did not even relent when his own guards refused to kill the priests (v.17c-18).

Of course, David's conscience was not clear in relation to the deaths of the priests: he had deceived Ahimelech into helping him when he was on the run and had thus made the priests unwitting accomplices to his escape. He recognised his responsibility, although precisely what he considered he had done wrong is not clear and he may merely have regretted not killing Doeg the Edomite (v.22).

Saul's actions were evil and David's were self-centred and irresponsible. And yet, God was over-ruling. Saul's actions resulted in God's judgment on Eli being finally executed (Ch.2 vv.31-33). His house was eliminated bar one survivor (Abiathar). Furthermore, Saul's actions continued the process by which the kingdom was to move from Saul to David as God had determined it should (Ch.16 v.1): Saul undermined himself in the eyes of his own court and he deprived himself of the services of the priests, the only surviving priest having fled to David, thus enhancing David's legitimacy (v.20).

Saul was responsible for his actions and so was David. The fact that God overruled such that they contributed to bringing about the fulfilment of God's purposes does not alter their culpability any more than the fact that Judas's actions led to God's fulfilling his plan for our salvation alters his culpability. Human responsibility and God's sovereignty stand together.

1. *Do you act badly when insecure? What is the key to avoiding this?*
2. *Have you reflected on how God fulfils his purposes even through the evil acts those who, knowingly or otherwise, oppose him? Do so now.*

Friday: 1 Samuel 23:1-29

Saul's murder of the priests of Nob showed again that he was unsuitable to be the king. David's actions in defending Keilah (deep in the south of Israel) showed that he was assuming the responsibilities of the king and the impression that he was the king in waiting was enhanced by the presence of a prophet (Gad, see Ch.22 v.5) and a priest with the "ephod" (v.6; see paragraph 4.2 in the "General notes" on page 63 regarding the "ephod").

Saul must have realised this and his determination to eliminate David increased. David was rightly concerned that, even though he had saved the people of Keilah from the Philistines, they would hand him over to Saul (vv.9-12) but his retreat to the Desert of Ziph did not enable him to relax since the Ziphites told Saul of his presence in their region (v.19).

David was afraid. He had a few hundred men, Saul had several thousand, and he was in hostile country (both from a geographic and a human point of view). Fortunately, Jonathan somehow slipped away from his father and, for the last time, saw David. He *"helped [David] to find strength in God"* (v.16). We know from both the books of Samuel and the Psalms that David's faith in God was strong but this does not mean that he was always at peace and was always able to be calmly confident in God's providence, as some of the Psalms in this reading plan demonstrate. They show that he struggled (although always in the context of his faith). Hence, he needed help on occasions and, when God provided it, he was not too proud to accept it.

Saul blessed the Ziphites in a manner that suggests that he may still have entertained the hope that God was with him (v.21) but he was mistaken. At one point, he was close to surrounding David (v.26). However, just then, the Philistines attacked and Saul had to break off his pursuit of David to deal with them (vv.27-28). Once again, God used a pagan people to achieve his goal: *"God did not give David into [Saul's] hands"* (v.14b).

1. *When you need help, how do you "find strength in God"? Do you have Christian friends who can help you? How might you find such friends?*
2. *Consider what we have been told about God's overruling in David's life. Are you confident that he overrules in yours? Why or why not?*

Week 10 (5th November to 9th November)
and
Week 11 (12th November to 16th November)
Further reflections

Our morning service on 21st October is an All Age service and the evening service on 28th October is an O2Q service and so there is no new part of 1 Samuel to consider this week. Furthermore, since November 11th is Remembrance Sunday, there won't be any next week either. In short, you are able to have two weeks off.

However, as in the case of Week 5, you may have found that there has been a lot to absorb in what you have read in the past four weeks. Hence, you may find it helpful to go back over Chapters 12 to 22 of 1 Samuel (and even the earlier chapters) and think further about them. You may even have a bit of catching up to do!

You might also like to take a look at some other Psalms of David. There are plenty to choose from but the following are particularly relevant:

- (i) *Psalms of David that relate to some of the events that are related in 1 Samuel:* These include Psalm 56 (which relates to David's period in Gath, see 1 Samuel 21:10-15); Psalm 142 (which relates to his period in the cave at Adullam, see 1 Samuel 22:1) and Psalm 54 (which relates to the second time when the Ziphites told Saul of David's location, see 1 Samuel 23:19).
- (ii) *Other Psalms of David that deal with similar issues to those we have been considering and which, in some cases, may have been composed while David was trying to avoid capture by Saul:* These include Psalm 4 and Psalm 13 (which may be contrasted), Psalm 17. Psalm 25 and Psalm 62. Psalm 46, although not by David, also deals with similar issues.

Week 12 (19th November to 23rd November)

Two ways to live: wisdom and folly

Monday: 1 Samuel 24:1-22

David retreated from Ziph to the rocky heights on the western edge of the Dead Sea (Ch.23 v.29). Having dealt with the Philistines, Saul pursued him there (vv.1-2) but, instead of Saul finding David, David found Saul (v.3). How should David interpret and respond to this turn of events?

His men had no doubt: God had put Saul into David's hands and David should kill him (v.4a, which may mean, "Today God has said...", i.e. "This is a sign from God!"). David recognised that God had put Saul into his hands but also recognised that this did not mean that he had the right to kill Saul (v.10). What had happened was indeed a sign of God's blessing but such a sign is never an invitation to do something contrary to God's law.

David recalled (v.12) that God had said, "*It is mine to avenge; I will repay*" (Deut 32:35; Hebrews 10:30). Even if someone wrongs us such that extreme sanctions are appropriate, we must leave the matter in God's hands. If we don't, we display a lack of trust in God and we will sin against him. Jesus, of course, perfectly exemplifies this attitude (1 Peter 2:21-23).

So, instead of killing Saul, David crept up to him and removed a corner of his robe (v.4b). This demonstrated that Saul was wrong to accuse David of seeking to harm him (v.9). Nonetheless, David subsequently recognised that he had gone to far in doing what he did (v.5). The reason is that his action was symbolic. When Samuel last saw Saul, Saul had torn a corner from Samuel's robe and Samuel had indicated that this was symbolic of the kingdom having been torn from Saul (Ch.15 vv.27-28). David's action indicated that he was taking Saul's kingdom and he realised that he should have left this in God's hands. He was right that God was going to give him the kingdom but it was not his to take and the symbol was inappropriate.

1. *Have you been in situations in which God has done something that clearly indicates his presence and protection? Thank God for them.*
2. *Have you ever avenged yourself? Think carefully! If you have, apologise and, in any event, thank God for his forgiveness.*

Tuesday: 1 Samuel 25:1-44

At a superficial level, today's passage is the story of how a local strong man got his comeuppance and how David secured his power base in southern Israel and, into the bargain, obtained a wise wife. It *is* the story of these things but it has a far deeper significance.

Samuel was very old when he died (v.1). His significance was profound since he had been the person used by God to declare his purposes in relation to the kingship: purposes that Chapter 24 shows are moving towards their climax as even Saul now recognised that David would be king (Ch.24 v.20).

David continued to move around in southern Israel and he clashed with Nabal, who judging by his wealth (v.2) must have been very powerful in the area. We may wonder what David was up to. Some have suggested that he was running a protection racket and that Nabal's servants were in on it. The evidence for this is thin but, if it were so, it would simply be another example of the fact that the Bible recognises that David was not perfect.

In any event, when he heard that Nabal had slighted him, David "lost it" (vv.12-13). He held Nabal in contempt (the name "Nabal" means "Fool" and may have been David's nickname for him) and his oath (v.22) was coarser than our Bibles suggest. They refer to "*one male*"; what David actually said is "*one wall pisser*"! Abigail's intervention resulted in him cooling down. He recognised that he was trying to avenge himself and to take matters into his own hands by seizing what he wanted (vv.32-34). When Saul made an unwise oath, he had to be forced to break it (Ch.14 vv.44-45) but David recognised that carrying out his oath would be a greater sin than he had committed by making it. He waited on God and God vindicated him (v.39).

The application of this to David's relationship with Saul must have been obvious. Chapter 24 shows that he knew that he should not avenge himself but his cutting of Saul's robe suggested that he was close to attempting to seize the kingdom. The incident with Nabal taught him to wait.

1. *Has God ever used another person to show you that you have embarked on a wrong course? Thank him for them and ask that he guard you.*
2. *Have you ever continued in an action knowing it is wrong? Seek God's forgiveness for this and pray that God would transform you.*

Wednesday: Psalm 33

David clearly learned from what happened in relation to Nabal. He knew that, although conveyed through Abigail, the lecture about how he should behave came from God (1 Samuel 25:32). Psalm 33 is not attributed to David but other Davidic psalms suggest that it reflects the mature faith that he developed. It is a hymn of praise to God for who he is and what he does and it invites us to join in the praise that it expresses (vv.1-3).

The author begins by reminding us that *“the word of the LORD is right and true”* (v.4a): God’s view of reality is perfect and reliable; he declares things as they are. Equally importantly, he fulfils his word since he is *“faithful in all he does”* (v.4b) and this faithfulness is for our good since *“the earth is full of his unfailing love”* (v.5b; yes, the Hebrew word is “hesed”!).

Creation itself bears witness to this through its majesty and order (vv.6-7/9). As many scientists have pointed out, one of the most amazing things about the universe is that it is ordered and thus comprehensible. We can easily lose our sense of awe in relation to this but we mustn’t: we should respond in reverent fear (v.8).

And God is not merely the now passive creator (the God imagined by deists): as David had experienced, he is active in the world (v.10) proactively pursuing his long-term plans (v.11). This last point is one that is hinted at a number of times in 1 Samuel and we will return to it next week.

So what conclusions should we logically draw from this? Those who are truly blessed are those who are among God’s people (v.12) and, since God sees all things and, indeed, created people (vv.13-15), ultimately earthly strength is of no relevance (vv.16-17; a point recognised in Hannah’s song). David had seen this point worked out in practice on several occasions.

Finally, God is watching those who rely on him (v.18; note that fearing God and placing our hope in his unfailing love are two sides of the same coin). He will look after his people (v.19) and so we should wait on him (v.20). David nearly forgot this when angry with Nabal.

1. *Think about the things mentioned in Psalm 33 and join the psalmist in praising God for them.*
2. *What does waiting on God involve? How might you do this?*

Thursday: 1 Samuel 26:1-25

The incident recorded in today's reading has a number of similarities with the incident recorded in Chapter 24 but it shows how the viewpoints of both David and Saul had moved on.

The Ziphites again sided with Saul (v.1; see Ch.23 v.19) and Saul again came against David with overwhelming force (v.2) but, this time, David's scouts alerted him to Saul's presence (v.4) and he deliberately approached Saul's army (v.5). His objectives are unclear but, whereas his last meeting with Saul came when he was hiding (Ch.24 v.3), on this occasion he took the initiative. He may even have been briefly tempted to attack Saul but he restrained himself and, in fact, acted in a way that demonstrated not only that he was not seeking Saul's life but also that he was prepared to allow God to give him the kingdom in God's own time (v.10).

David also showed respect for Saul: Saul had been appointed by God and it was for God to remove him (vv.9-10) and, in any event, God requires that we respect all people since all are made in the image of God, no matter how marred by sin that image may be (1 Peter 2:17).

This respect did not prevent David from verbally attacking those who were seeking his life. First, he rightly attacked Abner and Saul's guards for failing to protect Saul (vv.14-16). Sleeping while on guard duty was (and is) one of the most serious military offences since it puts the whole army at risk. Secondly, and more questionably, David cursed those who were urging his death (and, by implication, Saul himself, v.19).

When speaking to David after the incident in the cave in Chapter 24, Saul had admitted that David's behaviour that day had been "*righteous*" (Ch.24 v.17) but in other ways his response was equivocal and he had not accepted that he was in the wrong in relation to his dealings with David. This time, however, he accepted that events had shown that he had sinned (v.21a) and he should be at peace with David.

1. *Think further about the idea of leaving our vindication in God's hands. Do you need to change the way you respond to situations?*
2. *Think of Christ before Pilate (John 18:28-19:16 esp. 19:8-11). Do you have the same ability to leave things in God's hands and wait on him?*

Friday: Jeremiah 33:14-26

Now is a convenient opportunity to think further about the long-term significance of David. His descendants were to rule Judah (the southern Israelite kingdom) until 586 BC. His house was thus one of the longest lasting ruling houses in recorded history. This is impressive but God promised that his house would last “*for ever*” (2 Samuel 7:16) and 420 or so years is not “*for ever*”! Did God’s promise fail? No.

During those 420 years, the prophets began to understand that the promise was about something beyond David’s earthly dynasty. Isaiah said that “*a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse [David’s father]*” and that the Spirit would be with him in an extraordinary way such that he would inaugurate a perfect kingdom to which all nations would be drawn (Isaiah 11:1-10; see also Isaiah 4:2). A psalmist likewise envisaged an ideal king and even appeared to call the king “*God*” (Psalm 45, esp. v.6) and other psalmists spoke of the rule of God’s anointed king in expansive terms (e.g. Psalms 2 and 110). Then, around the time that the Babylonians brought the rule of the house of David to an end, Jeremiah took up the theme.

Jeremiah prophesied that God would make a “*Branch sprout from David’s line*” (i.e. raise up a king from among David’s descendants; v.15) and this king would be “*righteous*” and called “*The LORD Our Righteousness*” (v.16c; c.f. Ch.23 v.6c). That title was ambiguous: could it be that the king would be the LORD himself? And in what sense would he be “*Our Righteousness*”? Jeremiah also repeated God’s promise that the Davidic royal line, and the priesthood, would last for ever (vv.17-21). Was this a promise of the restoration of a line of kings? It was unclear but there are hints that a single person was in view (e.g. v.15c; see also Jeremiah 30:9). The detail was not revealed to Jeremiah but he knew that God was saying that he would use the house of David to establish his perfect rule.

Thus, the expectation of God’s perfect anointed king, the Messiah, was established. It took six centuries for the hope to be fulfilled but, in due time, “*Jesus Christ the son of David*” (Matthew 1:1) was born.

1. *In what ways did Jesus exhibit the characteristics of a perfect king? How was he “Our Righteousness”? See Romans 3:21 and 2 Corinthians 5:21.*
2. *In what ways did David’s life and reign point to Jesus?*

Week 13 (26th November to 30th November)

Two destinies: honour and judgment

Monday: 1 Samuel 27:1-28:2

David was not convinced by Saul's repentance (v.1). He declined Saul's request that he return to Saul's court (Ch.26 v.21) and instead fled to the Philistines (v.2). The king of Gath believed that David had irrevocably broken with the Israelites (v.12) and was so convinced of David's good faith that he took him on as his bodyguard (Ch.28 v.2b). This might sound extraordinary but kings throughout history have seen advantages in having a bodyguard comprising foreign mercenaries who have no local loyalties that might conflict with their loyalty to the king.

To achieve this position, David lied to the king (v.10) and resorted to brutal actions to ensure that his lying was not uncovered (v.11). In the short term, this was a successful ploy but it was risky. First, his duplicity was unlikely to remain a secret for very long; secondly, and much more seriously, although he was avoiding conflict with the Israelites while at Ziklag (almost in the Negev on the way towards Egypt), the time would certainly come when his overlord, the king of Gath, would require that he join the Philistines in an attack on Israel (Ch.28 v.1). What would happen then?

The Bible does not pass judgment on David's actions but it is notable that God is not mentioned in our reading today. David appears not to have sought his guidance and we see no indication of God approving of what David was doing. What was going on? There is no suggestion that David's faith failed him but it is entirely possible that he was exhausted after a long time on the run and gave way to fear and bad judgment. The key point to note is that this did not cause God to abandon him. The Bible makes it clear that God's election of David was not based on him being a perfect person.

1. *Have you behaved badly under pressure? How did others respond to this? Have you repented and sought God's forgiveness?*
2. *Can you think of Christians who have acted badly under pressure? How have you responded to this? How should you have responded?*

Tuesday: 1 Samuel 28:3-25

The Philistines marched up the coast in an effort to seize the Jezreel Valley and hence obtain domination of northern Israel. Saul's army faced the Philistines across the valley (v.4) and Saul was terrified (v.5). He wanted guidance but to whom could he turn? Samuel was dead (as we are reminded in v.3), there appears to have been no other prophet with Saul and he had killed the priests (Ch.22). In desperation, he turned to a spiritist or necromancer (the traditional term "witch" is misleading) even though it involved a dangerous journey around the flanks of the Philistine army.

Many modern Christians are disturbed by what followed. What happened? Is the Bible saying that the dead really can be conjured up? Can we really communicate with them?

It is important to start with the Bible's frequent strong condemnation of the consultation of mediums. For example, Leviticus 20:6 says "*I [God] will set my face against the person who turns to mediums and spiritists ... I will cut him off from his people*". Today's passage is indicating that Saul was in the final stage of his degradation immediately prior to being "*cut off*". Under no circumstances should any Christian be involved with mediums.

The Bible never tells us whether mediums genuinely have some mysterious power or whether it is bogus. Today's passage is unique in describing a séance and, although it may seem that Samuel was really present, that is not the only possible interpretation of the passage: Saul can't see him (v.13) and the woman later came to Saul (v.21) suggesting that she may have been behind a curtain or other barrier and told Saul what she heard Samuel say in her vision of him. The most that we can say is that the Bible does not want us to enquire into these matters but simply to rely on God himself.

Saul seems to have wanted to reverse God's judgment on him but what he got was a confirmation of that judgment (vv.16-19) and a declaration of the imminence of its execution. He was devastated (v.20).

1. *Have you ever been involved in occult activity? If so, repent, remembering that you can be forgiven and fully restored by God. If you remain worried, speak to a member of the Church leadership.*
2. *Why is such activity so wrong? What are the dangers?*

Wednesday: 1 Samuel 29:1-30:31

The events in today's reading begin as the Philistines were on the coastal plain on their way to the Jezreel Valley and they preceded the events of Chapter 28 (or, in the case of the events of the final part of Chapter 30, may have happened around the same time as them). The author or editor has not followed the chronological order so as to be able to draw out the contrast between what happened to David and what happened to Saul. Saul had turned his back on God and was reaping the consequences of this; David, for all his faults, had not and was on the brink of becoming king. Over all of this, God was working out his purposes.

As we saw two days ago, David had a serious problem of his own making: it appeared that he was going to have to fight against Israel. However, we know that the LORD was with David and, although the passage does not say so expressly, he got David off the hook. The Philistines were a confederacy. Most of their leaders were, rightly, wary of David (vv.4-5) and they compelled the king of Gath to send David home (vv.6-7). Unwittingly, they preserved David's credibility as the future king of Israel.

One can imagine the feelings of David and his men when they reached Ziklag and discovered that the Amalekites had taken advantage of their absence to destroy the town and take all the people and livestock with them as they left (Ch.30 vv.1-5). It is unsurprising that the men turned on David (v.6). He was to blame. Like Saul, David was faced with disaster.

Unlike Saul, however, David turned to God (vv.7-8a). He then obeyed what he was told (v.8b) and, once victory had been achieved, was careful to recognise the source of that victory and hence of the things that his army had recovered or taken from the Amalekites as a result (v.23). Furthermore, this understanding manifested itself in action: the distribution of the booty had to reflect its nature as a gift from God (vv.24-25). God had rescued David from his self-created problems and David responded in faith.

1. *Are you aware of God ever having saved you from the consequences of your own decisions and actions? Thank him for this and ask him to continue to do so.*
2. *Reflect again on the fact that God works out his purposes by using the decisions and actions of people who don't even acknowledge him.*

Thursday: 1 Samuel 31:1-13

The Battle of Mount Gilboa was important in political terms since it resulted in the Philistines dominating territory far from their heartlands and nearly cutting Israel in two. Nonetheless, the defeat and its political consequences are summarised in a few words (vv.1/7). The focus is on Saul.

We know from Chapter 28 that he was doomed but it comes as a shock to hear that most of his sons, including Jonathan, were killed (v.2) and even more of a shock that he committed suicide (v.4b). His was a truly tragic death. He had been warned many times about the consequences of his attitude but, rather than accept the will of God and act in faith, he had fought against it. The result was that he descended to worse and worse actions as he desperately tried to cling on to power. He was his own worst enemy and the things that he did merely contributed to his decline. In a Norse saga, we might have read of his death fighting a heroic if futile battle against overwhelming odds, staring defiantly at death. But that is fiction: the reality of Saul is that his life ended in despair as he saw that all was lost and, in an effort to avoid post-mortem humiliation, he took his own life.

The Philistines doubtless praised Dagon and their other gods and believed that they had not only defeated Saul but Israel and Yahweh, its god (vv.8-10). Some of the Israelites may well have been tempted to think the same thing. It is clear from the Bible's condemnations of the worship of foreign gods that many Israelites abandoned their God over the centuries and some may have done so at this time. After all, God did not seem to be with them and it was hard to see positives in what had occurred. Preventing the humiliation of the bodies of Saul and his sons was the most that could be done by those who remembered Saul with affection, such as the people of Jabesh Gilead (vv.11-13; see Ch.11 for the reason).

Both the Philistines and the Israelites who thought like them were wrong. Unknown to them, the Philistines had been an instrument in the fulfilment of God's will. Saul was defeated by God. We know this because of what 1 Samuel tells us and because it would become obvious in the coming years.

1. *What was Saul's fundamental problem? Look back at what we have read about him over recent weeks.*
2. *What did God achieve by this? Think what the Bible says about David.*

Friday: 1 Samuel 2:1-10

We have reached the end of 1 Samuel and we need to sit back and consider the big picture, which we will do by taking a further look at Hannah's song. It would be worthwhile glancing back at the notes for the Thursday of Week 1 before reading on,

The people upon whom 1 Samuel focuses (Eli, Samuel, Saul, Jonathan and David) had each experienced the things Hannah describes. The difference between them was that, whereas Samuel, Jonathan and David could rejoice in God's salvation (v.1b/c), Eli and Saul could not. They all encountered the God who Hannah praises but three found salvation and two did not.

Hannah's words also applied to the people of Israel as a whole: when relying on itself, the nation had been defeated (Chs.4/31) but, when it had relied on God, it had been victorious (Chs. 7/14/17). God had been vindicated, especially in relation to the Philistines (Chs.5-6) and Saul (Chs.28/31). He had proved himself to be a "Rock" (v.2c); he may not have judged "the end of the earth" (v.10b) but he had shown himself to be sovereign over everyone and everything about which we have read (v.8c-d).

Specifically, reversing the natural order since David was the youngest son (v.8), God had raised up David to be king and, even before he had taken office, had used him to demonstrate God's power and salvation (v.10d; Ch.17). 1 Samuel ends with what appears to be a serious defeat for the Israelites (Ch.31) but we know from 2 Samuel that this was not the end of the story: David's victory over Goliath was only a foretaste of what was to come; he was conclusively to defeat the Philistines (2 Samuel 5:17-25 and 8:1) and reign as God's anointed king.

And there is more. Hannah's song points forward to greater things, which were merely typified in the events of 1 Samuel: God replaced the faithless members of the house of Eli by the faithful (if imperfect) Samuel and ultimately by the house of Zadok as his anointed priests and we know that this pointed forward to the coming of the perfect high priest, Jesus (Hebrews 4:14-5:10); God replaced the faithless Saul with the faithful (if imperfect) David as his anointed king and we know that David was the ancestor of the perfect anointed king, Jesus (John 18:37); like David, in worldly terms, Jesus did not appear to be the material of a king (c.f. Isaiah

53:2) but the salvation provided by Samuel's and David's victories by God's power pointed forward to the greater salvation Jesus won by God's power. The weakness of David's as he approached the battle with Goliath and the apparent foolishness of his actions is reflected in the weakness of Jesus before the Jewish and Roman authorities and the "*foolishness*" of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:20-25).

Hannah recognised the true majesty of God. She saw that what he had done for her, wonderful though it was, was merely a small part of a much bigger picture. She understood that God was in sovereign control of the world and working his out his purpose of salvation. She could probably only imagine this salvation in relation to her own time and place. She looked forward to God working out his purposes for her people and 1 Samuel shows that her confidence was not misplaced either at a personal level or the national level. Furthermore, what she said reflects the reality of God at all times and in all places. Hannah would have had no inkling of it but her song received its ultimate fulfilment in Jesus, the true king.

*There is no-one holy like the LORD;
there is no-one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.*
(Hannah: 1 Samuel 2:2)

*The LORD lives! Praise be to my Rock!
Exalted be God, the Rock, my Saviour!*
(David: 2 Samuel 22:47)

*Above his head they placed
the written charge against him:
THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS*
(Matthew 27:37)

Appendix

Additional information

1. The historical background

Events in the history of the Israelite kingdoms after the reign of Solomon (who died around 930 BC) can normally be dated to within a few years. It is impossible to be so precise with earlier such events but accuracy within a few decades remains possible and we can say with confidence that the events recorded in 1 Samuel took place during the eleventh century BC. The birth of Samuel (recorded in the first chapter of the book) probably took place in the first quarter of that century and the Battle of Mount Gilboa (with which the book ends) took place around 1010 give or take a few years.

During the eleventh century, there were no great powers dominating or seeking to dominate the area in which the Israelites lived. For reasons that are not entirely clear (but which may be to do with climate change), all of the powers, such as the Egyptian and the Hittite empires, that had been active in the ancient Near East a couple of hundred years earlier had declined. The result was that, in contrast to the situation that would exist after the tenth century, the Israelites and other peoples of the Canaan area were able to focus on their own affairs.

By 1100 BC, the Israelites had been long settled in Canaan but they did not have exclusive occupation of it. They had failed to drive out some of the pre-existing Canaanite population (see Judges 1:19-36). Furthermore, around 1200 BC, the Philistines began to settle on the coastal strip of southern Canaan. They were not Semitic. They came from the Aegean area (possibly, Crete) and they were an advanced people. Archaeology has shown that they were more sophisticated than the Israelites both in terms of their culture (e.g. pottery) and technology (e.g. they had weapons made of iron, whilst the Israelites relied on bronze, and they had chariots, which were not possessed by the Israelites until the time of King David). We know nothing of their historic religion but, over time, they adopted the religion of the Canaanites and, by the time of 1 Samuel, they worshiped gods such as Dagon and Baal. This polytheism among a materially successful people on their doorstep proved to be a constant snare for the Israelites.

The first mention of the Philistines in the Biblical history of Israel is in relation to the story of Samson (Judges 14:1) but it is clear that they had been troubling the Israelites previously since we are told that *“at that time they were ruling over Israel”* (Judges 14:4). The Israelites had had some success in retaining a modicum of independence but it seems that, during Samuel’s childhood, the Philistines had the upper hand. Samuel’s victory at the Battle of Mizpah (1 Samuel 7) and Saul’s at the Battle of Michmash (1 Samuel 14) drove them out of the central hill country and into the coastal plain. Nonetheless, they were to remain a threat to Israel into the reign of David, even extending their power into northern Israel following the Battle of Mount Gilboa (1 Samuel 31).

The Israelites at this time comprised a tribal confederation. Moses and then Joshua had led them into the Promised Land (see parts of the books of Numbers, Deuteronomy and Joshua) but, having got there, they had divided into their tribal groups and settled over a large area. From time to time, in order to resist a mutual enemy, they came together under a common leader (the so-called “judges” such as Deborah and Gideon; see Judges 4-8). However, most of the time they were not united and sometime they even fought one another (see Judges 9, 18 and 19-21). As the book of Judges puts it, *“In those days, Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit”* (Judges 17:6; see also 19:1 and 21:25).

It is clear that the chronic disunity of the Israelite tribes in the face of the Philistine threat underlay the desire of many Israelites for king and 1 Samuel (and the first few chapters of 2 Samuel) tells the story of the transition of the Israelites from the tribal confederation that existed at the start of the eleventh century to the united Israelite kingdom under King David that came into existence near its end.

When reading 1 Samuel, it is important to recognise the long period of time that it covers. Gaps of many years, even a decade or more, sometimes separate the events recorded in successive chapters. For example, there is clearly a period of at least a few years between the dedication of Samuel in Chapter 2 and the start of his prophetic ministry in Chapter 3; the period prior to the Israelite defeat at Ebenezer in Chapter 4 is probably even longer and the gaps between events cumulatively result in Samuel already being old by the time of the events of Chapter 8.

2. The geographical setting

1 Samuel contains a considerable amount of circumstantial detail especially in relation to the places where things happened. In some cases, we are not sure where the relevant places were (e.g. there are several suggestions as to the location of the Philistine city of Gath). However, in most cases, modern archaeology has located the places with a good level of confidence.

The events in 1 Samuel took place in a relatively small area. We read of campaigns of both Saul and David against the Amalekites on the edge of the Negev desert (1 Samuel 15 and 30) and we are told that Saul fought “*Moab, the Ammonites, the kings of Zobah, and the Philistines*” (1 Samuel 14:47) which suggests that Saul may have campaigned to the east and north of the Israelite heartlands. On one occasion, David also crossed to the far side of the Dead Sea (1 Samuel 22:3). However, the overwhelming majority of the events in 1 Samuel took place in the area from **Ziklag** (probably about 35 miles south south-west of Jerusalem) to **Mount Gilboa** above the **Jezeel Valley** (about 50 miles north of Jerusalem) and from **Ashdod** (35 miles west of Jerusalem) to the **River Jordan** (about 20 miles east of Jerusalem).

The centre of the action in the first few Chapters of 1 Samuel is **Shiloh**, the central shrine, located approximately 20 miles north of Jerusalem. Then, in Chapter 4, it moves to **Ebenezer**, probably located about 20 miles to the west of Shiloh, and the five Philistine cities which were scattered to the south along the coast and coastal plain (being, in probable order from north to south, **Ekron, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath** and **Gaza**).

Thereafter, the focus moves to the area just north of Jerusalem and south of Shiloh in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin (to which Saul belonged). There, within a few miles of one another, were found **Ramah** (probably the same place as **Ramathaim**, which was the home of Samuel), **Kiriath Jearim** (where the Ark of the Covenant was placed after the destruction of Shiloh), **Gibeah** (where Saul’s palace was located), **Mizpah** (where the Philistines were defeated and Saul selected as king), **Michmash** (where Jonathan and Saul defeated the Philistines), **Nob** (where the central sanctuary seems to have been located after the destruction of Shiloh) and **Bethel** (which was an ancient and important town although it does not play a significant role

in the events of 1 Samuel). **Gilgal** (where Saul was both confirmed and rejected as king) was located a few miles to the east near the River Jordan.

When David fled from Saul (1 Samuel 21), he headed south and then east before spending his exile roaming around the wilderness areas of Judah, to the south of Jerusalem, and the surrounding area. During his wanderings, he went west into the coastal plain to go to Gath, east to Moab on the far side of the Dead Sea and south into the northern Negev desert to fight the Amalekites. As indicated above, his base at **Ziklag** was in the far south of Israel away from most other settlements other than **Beersheba** (which was located approximately 45 miles south south-west of Jerusalem and which was the traditional southernmost point of the country).

In addition to the Philistines, the other peoples involved in the events recorded in 1 Samuel are the **Amalekites** (in the desert areas to the south), the **Moabites** (across the Dead Sea to the east), the **Ammonites** (to the north of the Moabites, to the east of the Dead Sea and the River Jordan) and the **Canaanites** (who were still living in some parts of Israel). We also hear of the **Kenites**, who lived close to the people of the tribe of Judah in the south of the country.

Jerusalem does not feature in 1 Samuel, except for a passing reference (1 Samuel 17:54, which may be looking forward some years). The reason is that it was not an Israelite city in the eleventh century. Indeed, it was not even a true city but merely a fortress and, until David conquered it in the following century (2 Samuel 5:6-7), it was in the hands of the Jebusites, although some Israelites may have lived there or in the immediately surrounding area.

If you want to find out where the places you are reading about were, you will find a lot of helpful resources on line. In particular, you will find helpful (if, in some respect, conjectural) maps on the StudyLight.org web-site. Maps 47 to 50 on that site are likely to be the most useful and will be found at:

<https://www.studylight.org/pastoral-resources/bible-map-archive/browse.cgi?st=60#047>

3. The nature of 1 Samuel

1 Samuel is not a comprehensive history of eleventh century Israel. Those (like me) who are interested in ancient history may find that it leaves obscure things that we would like to learn about. Its purpose is not to give a lesson in ancient history but to teach us about God and his acts.

Although most Biblical history is written in chronological order, there are some parts that are not and some parts where the chronology is uncertain. In relation to 1 Samuel, the most important points are (i) that the events of the first three chapters probably took place during the same period as those of the last few chapters of the book of Judges and (ii) that some of the events in the book itself may not be recorded in chronological order.

For example, it is clear that the events of Chapter 29 (David leaving the Philistine army) preceded those of Chapter 28 (Saul consulting the “Witch of Endor”) and it is possible that the events of Chapters 16 and 17 (David’s anointing, appointment as court musician and confrontation with Goliath) may have occurred in a different order from the order in which they are presented. This is not because the author or editor of the book was careless, ignorant or aiming to mislead. It is because his concern was to bring out the significance of events and link things together; the precise chronology was a secondary matter.

We do not know who wrote or edited 1 Samuel. It covers a century and so there were doubtless several authors. The Bible itself mentions some of its probable sources: the “*Book of Jashar*” (2 Samuel 1:18) and “*the records of Samuel the seer, the records of Nathan the prophet and the records of Gad the seer*” (1 Chronicles 29:29). The person who edited the final book may also have drawn on court military records and family records.

This may account for some of the repetition and other stylistic features of the book. Furthermore, ancient literature employed far more repetition than we are used to, in part because it was designed to be read aloud and to be memorable and in part as a way of emphasising points.

In short, we need to be careful to recognise the nature of 1 Samuel otherwise we will find it rather odd, become distracted by secondary matters and, potentially, draw false conclusions.

4. General notes

The following notes comprise explanations of a few issues that come up on a number of occasions in 1 Samuel and may raise questions.

4.1 The name of God

God is normally referred to in 1 Samuel by his covenant name that was given to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:13-15). In the original Hebrew, this is spelt YHWH (using Latin script) and it is linked to the verb “to be”, thus reminding us of God’s statement, “*I am who I am*” (Exodus 3:14).

Ancient written Hebrew contained only consonants and we are not sure how YHWH was pronounced. One suggestion is “Jehovah” but scholars now generally prefer “Yahweh”. In any event, in ancient times, the name was considered too holy to vocalise and, when the Hebrew Bible was read, the name was replaced by “the Lord”. This convention is followed in our modern English Bibles but, in order to distinguish references to the name of God from other words that are also best translated “the Lord”, our Bibles use upper case letters (i.e. “the LORD”) whenever translating YHWH. This convention is followed in this reading plan.

On occasions, God is referred to in 1 Samuel using the Hebrew “El”. This is a general term for God not carrying the overtones of God’s covenant with his people that YHWH carries. Our Bibles translate it simply as “God”.

4.2 Ephods

There are a number of references to “ephods” in 1 Samuel. They were clearly garments but, unfortunately, we do not know what they looked like.

There seem to have been two distinct things. First, linen ephods, which were worn by many, probably all, priests. We are told that Samuel wore one even as a child (1 Samuel 2:18) and that the priests of Nob all wore them (1 Samuel 22:18). A robe seems to have been worn over the ephods, which were thus probably some kind of shirt.

In addition, we hear about “*the ephod*”, which was reserved for the high priest (see, for example, 1 Samuel 23:6). This seems to have been more

elaborate than the normal ephods and to have been the repository of the Urim and Thummim, which were instruments of some kind that were used when discerning God's will. Hence, possession of a priest with the ephod was regarded as a matter of some importance.

4.3 Thousands

In various places in 1 Samuel, our Church Bibles state the number of people involved in a particular incident in multiples of 1000 and, on occasions, the numbers seem extraordinarily high. For example, in 1 Samuel 4:10, we are told that the Israelites lost 30,000 men and in 1 Samuel 11:8 we are told that Saul had 300,000 men from Israel and 30,000 from Judah.

Some people suggest that these numbers are overstated but there is no good reason to leap to this conclusion. First, the numbers involved in ancient warfare were sometimes surprisingly high because of the "total war" nature of some such warfare and the military nature of some societies. For example, deaths in the major battles fought by the Romans appear frequently to have exceeded 20,000 and there is good reason for believing that some other ancient battles resulted in even larger casualties.

More fundamentally, the Hebrew word 'elep can mean "thousand" or it can refer to a military unit or a clan or group of people. In some cases, the context makes its meaning clear. Thus, for example, in 1 Samuel 10:19 and 23:23, it clearly means "clan". However, in other places, its meaning is much less clear. Hence, in 1 Samuel 4:10, we may be being told that 30 military units were destroyed and, in 1 Samuel 11:8, that Saul raised 300 units from Israel and 30 from Judah. The number of men in each unit is not known and the experience of armies in later times suggests that it might have been much less than the thousand that their name might imply and that different units (which were probably raised from different clans) may have comprised significantly different numbers of men.

In short, we should not place too much weight on the precise number of people involved or killed in particular battles but should rather note whether it is being indicated that it was a few or many and then seek to focus on the more important points being made in the text.