



S. I. McMillen, in his book *None of These Diseases*, tells a story of a young woman who wanted to go to college, but her heart sank when she read the question on the application blank that asked, "Are you a leader?"

Being both honest and conscientious, she wrote, "No," and returned the application, expecting the worst. To her surprise, she received this letter from the college: "Dear Applicant: A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower."

As that college admission board longed for an honest follower, I got to thinking, I'll wager that the one follower turned out to be the best kind of leader at her college.

So too with the nation of Israel. As we read The Story together, we are finding that the best leaders are followers of God. But these interesting and sad stories of flawed leaders can teach us a great deal as we continue the story. Turn to 1 Samuel 8.

As we continue The Story we turn a corner this morning. We move from the period of the Judges to the period of the Kings. Remember the Judges? They were men and women that God raised up to help break the cycle of sin in Israel. Some of these names might sound familiar from your reading—Ehud, Deborah, Barak, Gideon, Samson, Eli. Some of them were leaders who followed God in really tough times. Today we introduce you to a man named Samuel. Samuel was the last of the Judges and he was also a prophet and a priest for the people before God.

So about 40 years before we meet Saul, Samuel had grown old, and his sons took over his responsibilities to be judges of the nation. Sadly even Samuel's sons didn't follow God. They accepted bribes and didn't stand up for justice. Because of this, the elders of Israel took Samuel aside and said to him, "You're old Samuel, and your sons are lousy leaders, therefore appoint a king to lead us, a king like other nations have." This upset Samuel. He knew that Israel wasn't supposed to be like other nations. It grieved him that his nation envied other nations, nations that didn't follow God.

Not only that, Samuel felt rejected. He went to God in prayer. In 8:7 God says to Samuel, *"It is not you Samuel that they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king, as they have done from the day I brought them out of Egypt. They would rather serve other gods."*

Samuel told the people what God had said to him. Then he said, "if a king reigns over you, your sons will be taken to serve in the army, he will put your daughters to work at hard jobs to pay for his officials and attendants, he will take your best fields, and a tenth of your grain and grapes, and your best stuff will be handed over to him. And one day you will cry out for relief from the king you have been given."

"But the people refused to listen to Samuel. 'No!' they said. 'We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles'" (1 Samuel 8:19-20).

What was happening? The people were rejecting God's reign. They wanted to put their confidence in themselves and in a human person because they didn't believe God's ways were good enough. Yet here is the tragic irony. When the nation put its trust in God they never lost a battle, yet now they want a human king to lead them.

God's whole mission for Israel was that they not be like the other nations. They were to be different and distinct. They were his treasured possession to offer hope to the other nations.

"When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD. The LORD answered, 'Listen to them and give them a king'" (8:21-22).

Be careful what you ask God for. You might get it and some hard lessons as well. God had intended to give the people a king, it just wasn't the right time yet. The man that God wanted to anoint as King hadn't been born yet. But since the Israelites were clamoring for a king, God gave them the best man available, a complex man, who I think we can relate to very well. His dad was named Kish and Kish provided well for his children.

"He had a son named Saul, an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites—a head taller than any of the others" (9:2).

So enter Saul. He was tall, dark and handsome, likely the captain of his basketball team. Probably a good dancer too.

"When Samuel caught sight of Saul, the LORD said to him, 'This is the man I spoke to you about; he will govern my people'" (9:17).

Notice there is no mention of his faith or his character or his humility in the description. All the emphasis was on the external. The people will look at Saul and say, "No, that's our choice for a king. Who else could measure up to that cool Amalekite king?"

Our king is better looking!" But we will learn, the Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outer appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.

You have to feel for Saul. In a matter of hours he went from life in the smallest tribe of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin, to the biggest stage in all of Israel. One day he was looking for his donkeys with a servant and the next day he has every donkey and every other desirable thing in Israel at his beckon call. That kind of rapid rise would be hard for anyone. Saul needs God at the center of his life.

Now we see Samuel getting busy preparing Saul as best he could. The first thing that happens, Samuel anoints Saul with oil.

"Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured it on Saul's head and kissed him, saying, 'Has not the LORD anointed you leader over his inheritance?'" (10:1).

"Saul will be Israel's first king. You will reign over Israel. No more judges; you will now judge. You will save your people from their enemies." Then he tells Saul to go back to his home in the town of Gibeah, and a bunch of prophets will come down from the hillsides and they will worship and they will prophesy. "The Spirit of God will come upon you and you will be changed and you will know God will be with you." Samuel goes on and tells him,

"Go down ahead of me to Gilgal. I will surely come down to you to sacrifice burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, but you must wait seven days until I come to you and tell you what you are to do." As Saul turned to leave Samuel, God changed Saul's heart, and all these signs were fulfilled that day (10:8-9).

While Saul was worshipping with the prophets, Samuel went to a place called Mizpah to the west, and summoned all the people of Israel to go there. So everyone made the journey to Mizpah. It was going to be a coronation ceremony and great parties at night. So Samuel in dramatic fashion stands before all the people who had come to town and said, "because you rejected God and demanded the king, here he is."

He introduces all the 12 tribes. The people are wondering which tribe will produce their first king. It was exciting. Finally he gets to the tribe of Benjamin and introduces each clan. The anticipation is palpable. This is going to be great! Don't you just get that feeling? Get your cameras ready. It's all coming together beautifully. Women swoon, men kneel down. God will give us a Ronald Reagan, George Patton and Billy Graham all in one. And then he gets to Saul's clan and introduces his father Kish.

"Finally Saul son of Kish was chosen. But when they looked for him, he was not to be found. So they inquired further of the LORD, 'Has the man come here yet?' And the Lord said, 'Yes, he has hidden himself among the baggage.

They ran and brought him out, and as he stood among the people he was a head taller than any of

the others. Samuel said, 'Do you see the man the LORD has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people.' Then the people shouted, 'Long live the king!'" (10:21-24).

Saul is a complex guy. He was flawed but he had the Holy Spirit in him. Every single one of us who claim to be followers of Christ can relate to this complex guy. How many of us can say, "I do what I don't want to do, and don't do what I want to do. Sometimes I am despondent over my sin and feel totally useless. Other times God shows up in spite of me. And it's only by his grace."

Saul is soon battle tested. An arch enemy of Israel, the Ammonites, came across the border and attacked a little vulnerable town called Jabesh Gilead, about 40 miles north and east of the Jordan River. Saul soon heard that no one was volunteering to go and help the people at Jabesh Gilead.

"When Saul heard their words, the Spirit of God came upon him in power, and he burned with anger. He took a pair of oxen, cut them into pieces, and sent the pieces by messengers throughout Israel, proclaiming, 'This is what will be done to the oxen of anyone who does not follow Saul and Samuel.' Then the terror of the LORD fell on the people, and they turned out as one man (11:6-7).

The next day Saul led 330,000 volunteers into battle. They routed the Ammonites.

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

And the people celebrated the great victory. Samuel felt old and tired. He stood up once more before the people and he told them how it was God, not a man, who delivered them. He warned the people and he warned this new king.

"If you fear the LORD and serve and obey him and do not rebel against his commands, and if both you and the king who reigns over you follow the LORD your God - good! But if you do not obey the LORD, and if you rebel against his commands, his hand will be against you, as it was against your fathers" (12:14-15).

In Chapter 13 we are introduced to Saul's son Jonathan. You like him immediately. He too was a mighty warrior, but you see his tender heart. He wasn't hiding away as the King's coddled son. He fought on the front lines, and his men loved him. He led his men to victory in a small skirmish with the Philistines and then Saul sent for Jonathan and his men to join him and his men in Gilgal. The Philistines assembled a powerful army to go against Saul in Gilgal. It says the men were afraid, and they began to scatter.

"When the men of Israel saw that their situation was critical and that their army was hard pressed, they hid in caves and thickets, among the rocks,

and in pits and cisterns. Saul remained in Gilgal, and all the troops with him were quaking with fear. He waited 7 days, the time set by Samuel; but Samuel didn't come to Gilgal, and Saul's men began to scatter. So he said, 'Bring me the burnt offering and the fellowship offering.' And Saul offered up the burnt offering" (13:6-9).

Just as he finished making the burnt offering, Samuel arrived and Saul went out to greet him.

"What have you done?" asked Samuel. Saul replied, 'When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling..., I thought, now the Philistines were come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the LORD's favor. So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering.' You acted foolishly,' Samuel said. 'You have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God gave you;'" (13:11-13).

When he should have been waiting and praying, he thought, "I am king, I am judge, I can be priest also. Forget what Samuel told me, I have a war to run." He was assuming power he didn't have, a fatal flaw for every leader. He felt compelled. In other words, he's saying he didn't have a choice. There is no evidence that he repented for this act of rebellion. He blames. He never takes personal responsibility. He becomes impatient and takes things into his own hands. Samuel doesn't have any tolerance for how Saul tries to justify his actions. And we catch a glimpse that God's upper story will continue without Saul.

"But now your kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the Lord's command'" (13:14).

Do we listen to those selfish thoughts thinking, God, I've sacrificed so much for you. God, I've sacrificed my time, my money my resources, the church affirms me. I'm a great asset to your work on earth. I've earned a little leeway here, I do good things, really good things. I don't have to obey you in this one dark area you keep reminding me about.

You see the fatal flaw revealed here is disobedience. Saul listened to his own voice for guidance, or the voices of his men instead of the voice of God through Samuel. He did what he saw best in his own eyes, and then defended his disobedience as good religion.

What are the voices we hear? Where are those voices coming from that make us angry, fearful? A question for us this morning is, How do I put myself in a place to listen to God instead of all the other voices talking at me? How do I posture myself to really listen to God? If I have a relationship with Jesus I have the spirit in me. Jesus sent his Spirit. It's a gift. It's a myth to believe we can't be guided by the Spirit. I got to thinking, If God can guide Balaam's donkey he can guide me too.

You want to know if what you are hearing is from God? Whatever impression, whatever word you hear, ask yourself, does what I hear align 100% with Scripture? Will what I hear be affirmed by the community of believing friends I have in my life right now? Does what I think I am hearing from God about guidance glorify God and bless others or does it glorify me and bless me?

In Chapter 14 we read that Jonathan and his men were once again successful in battle. They routed some Philistines; they were on the run. Saul took notice and assembled all of his reinforcements and went into battle. It was fierce fighting. Saul stood up before his men and said something really stupid.

'Now the men of Israel were in distress that day because Saul had bound the people under an oath, saying, 'Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies!' So none of the troops tasted food" (14:24).

What possessed Saul to declare this foolish oath, "if you eat before the battle is over I will kill you"? Pride. I'm large and in charge and you will listen to me. I am relevant. My will be done. You will sacrifice your food because I said so. Period.

"When they went into the woods, they saw the honey oozing out, yet no one put his hand to his mouth, because they feared the oath. But Jonathan had not heard that his father had bound the people with the oath, so he reached out the end of his staff that was in his hand and dipped it into the honeycomb. He raised his hand to his mouth, and his eyes brightened (14:26-27).

"Then Saul said to Jonathan, 'Tell me what you have done.' So Jonathan told him, 'I merely tasted a little honey with the end of my staff. And now I must die?' Saul said, 'May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if you do not die, Jonathan'" (14:43-44).

Right there Saul was willing to run a sword through his son in order to make an example that his word was final. It would have worked if it wasn't for Saul's army rising up to defend Jonathan.

"But the men said to Saul, 'Should Jonathan die – he who has brought about this great deliverance in Israel? Never! As surely as the LORD lives, not a hair of his head will fall to the ground, for he did this today with God's help.' So the men rescued Jonathan, and he was not put to death" (14:45-46).

Saul's leadership authority is unraveling fast now. The men see that God spoke much more clearly through Jonathan's victory than through Saul's stupid vow.

I said something a couple of weeks ago that jeopardized someone. If I was unwilling to admit my sin, unwilling to understand how my sin hurt others, unwilling to ask for forgiveness, or change course, I would have forfeited my leadership authority in this person. And I believe God showed me grace and our relationship

is in a great place. You will stay stupid things, it's a given. It's what we do after that redeems it.

"Samuel said to Saul, 'I am the one the LORD has sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; so listen now to the message from the LORD. This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt'" (15:1-2).

Remember from Exodus 17 the Amalekites attacked the Israelites? God said that they would be at war with them from generation to generation. God wanted his nation protected from this horrible, evil, demonic nation once and for all. In verse 3 God commands, *"totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare a person or cattle or livestock, camels or donkeys."* So Saul attacked with Samuel's blessing.

"He took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword. But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs—everything that was good."

"Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel: 'I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions.' Samuel was troubled and he cried out to the Lord all that night."

"Early in the morning Samuel got up and went to meet Saul, but he was told, 'Saul has gone to Carmel. There he has set up a monument in his own honor and has turned and gone on down to Gilgal'" (15:8b-12).

Can you imagine the stress in Samuel's heart? God just tells him that he was grieved he made Saul king, and then I find out Saul is making a monument in God's honor? No, in his own honor. I'm not sure Saul ever was humble. He started out a likable self-deprecating guy, but in this complicated person, we see pride taking over. He was a man full of pride. The purpose of his monument was for people to go and pay him homage.

"When Samuel reached him, Saul said, 'The Lord bless you! I have carried out the LORD's instructions.' But Samuel said, 'What then is the bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear? Stop!' Samuel said to Saul. 'Let me tell you what the Lord said to me last night'" (15:13-16).

"But I did obey the Lord, Saul said. 'I went on the mission the LORD assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord your God at Gilgal'" (15:20-21).

The best is really here to sacrifice to the Lord. Did you catch it? The Lord "your" God, not "My God," not "Our God." "Your God." This reveals how far Saul has drifted. He can't even use the word "My" God. This is a good example of the sin of pride separating us from our need for God and establishing us as our God. Whoever is in charge of our lives is our God. Psalm 10:4 says, *"In his pride the wicked does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God."* Then Samuel replies with probably one of the most well known verses in the book.

"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, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king" (15:22-23).

God far more delights in obedience than religious works. Don't ever be fooled into believing you can use your service to God as an excuse to allow something rotting to remain in your life. Service to God is wonderful, but it won't hide a disobedient heart. Is there an area that you've been withholding from God? Rejected God's reign in your life? Too externally focused? Impatient? Unwise words? Puffed up with pride? Listen to what God might be wanting to teach you this morning.

For some of us the right question to ask ourselves is, "In what area do I need to practice obedience?" We won't lead well unless we follow. It's not as difficult as you might think to obey him. In the New Testament, John describes it this way, "This is love for God: To obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome."

For others of us today we need to think of someone going down a bad path and commit to pray for him or her. It's fascinating to me that Samuel kept interceding for people even though they were sliding away spiritually. If I'm not praying for people, I'm not honoring God.

When Samuel died, everyone in Israel wept. They wept because of all that he had become. He was courageous, obedient, loving, and had a passion for God. On the other hand when Saul dies, we're told that David commands the people to weep.

"It's man's way for a man to become a god to save other men, but it's God's way to turn God into a man to save other men. You are the true King. For the sake of your great name Lord, you don't reject us. Even though we sin, God you are still gracious to us. No man can be our king. And no man can lead without serving. May we serve no one but Jesus, our Savior, Redeemer and King."

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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