

Samuel:

My mother was drunk. In front of a priest. My mother was drunk in front of *Levi* the priest. At least she seemed to be. She was just mouthing words and the priest assumed she was drunk. But she was mouthing words of prayer. And when my mama prayed hard, she hardly let out a sound and she couldn't stand still. So, the priest had good reason to assume she was drunk.

My mother prayed especially hard that day. She was childless, and growing old. She desperately wanted a child. The priest heard her story, blessed her, my parents made love, God answered her prayers, and voila, I came along nine months later. In her desperation to get pregnant, my mother had made a vow to God, she dedicated my life to him. That is how I came to have two mothers and two fathers.

My birth father was named, Elkanah. He had two wives Peninnah and Hannah, who was my birth mother. Peninnah bullied Hannah because she was childless. My birth forced Peninnah to behave better. My mother's vow to dedicate my life to God was enacted when I was only a few years old. She took me to Eli to be raised as a man of God. Yes, *that* Eli, the priest who accused my mother of being drunk, and yes, that Eli is the man who became my second father.

Every year, my mother would bring me a little robe, and every year Eli would bless her. She went on to have three sons and two daughters! But I never knew my siblings well because they lived in the hill country of Ephraim while I lived in Shiloh with the Eli.

Remember the town of Shiloh? It was located about twenty miles north of Jerusalem. About three centuries before my time, when Joshua led the Israelites into the Canaan, they gave the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant a permanent home in Shiloh.¹ Both remained in Shiloh until my time.

Remember that Joshua and the Israelites were instructed by God to completely dominate Canaan and destroy all of the peoples living there? Unfortunately, they chose not to do so. As a result of their disobedience, the Israelites would be led into idol worship, and would be at war with the surviving people groups.

¹ Joshua 18:1

I grew in stature and in favor with the Lord and with people. In fact, all of Israel began to recognize me as a prophet. The Lord revealed himself to me through his word.² He even warned me what would happen to the house of Eli. Eli's two sons were priests, but they were very evil. Eli would not discipline them. In fact, they became so evil that a man came to Eli and prophesied to him that his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, would die on the same day, and that God would raise up a faithful priest to take their place.

While Eli was still alive, the Israelite soldiers went to fight against the Philistines out near Ebenezer. The Philistines prevailed and killed about four thousand Israelites. In their desperation, the Israelites asked that the Ark of the Covenant be brought from Shiloh so the Lord would lead them to victory. Hophni and Phinehas, Eli's sons, brought the Ark. When they arrived in the Israelite camp, the Israelites shouted with joy. This put great fear into the hearts of the Philistines.

Unfortunately, their fear was short-lived. The Philistines routed the Israelites, killing thirty-thousand foot-soldiers, and captured the Ark. Hophni and Phinehas died that day, just as prophesied. Eli heard the news about the Ark and his sons, and he fell out of his chair backwards and broke his neck. That day, I lost my father...but... I became the undisputed leader of Israel.

The Philistines were overjoyed to capture the Ark of the Covenant because they thought they now had control of Israel's powerful God. Instead, God plagued whichever Philistine city contained the Ark. After about seven months, the Philistines had the good sense to return the Ark to the Israelites, along with some golden treasures. After a short detour in the town of Beth Shemesh, the Ark was moved to Kiriath Jearim, where it would stay for twenty years.

Remember what was originally placed in the Ark of the Covenant by Moses? Manna in a golden jar, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone copies of the Ten Commandments. Maybe you are curious as to what was in the Ark of the Covenant after it was returned to the Israelites by the Philistines. So were seventy inhabitants of Beth Shemesh. They looked inside the Ark. They weren't authorized to do so. They were struck dead immediately. By God.

After the Ark was returned to Israel, the Israelites decided to turn back to the Lord, and away from worship of idols. Immediately, we Israelites defeated the Philistines in a battle at Mizpah. After that, Israel was at peace for nearly the remainder of my life. I say "nearly," because it turned out that my own two sons chose to be evil, and the Israelites refused to accept them as my successors. Instead, the Israelites insisted that I appoint a king over the country, so they could be like the kingdoms around them.

I found this more than a little distressing. I turned to the Lord as I had always done. He correctly assessed that the people were not rejecting me, but were rejecting him just as they had done since the time of Moses. Rather than punishing them, God had me warn them of the many

² 1 Sam. 3:19-21

disadvantages of having an earthly king instead of a heavenly king. No matter that it was a horrible choice, the people continued to insist on an earthly king. God granted their request.

Under God's direction, I anointed an unknown farm boy as the first king. Other than being tall, he wasn't much to start with, but he must have been the best choice that God had. And he did turn out to be a powerful warrior, and a builder of the kingdom of the united tribes of Israel. I will let him tell his own story, but I do want to describe the beginning of his downfall, as it concludes my own story.

The Amalekites were Israel's long-time enemy. These people had tormented Israel when they left Egypt. At that time, God vowed to erase any memory of them from the face of the earth. God ordered Saul to completely destroy *all* of the Amalekites and *all* of their animals. King Saul chose to *almost* wipe them out. He spared the king and all of the choice animals. When I found out that Saul had willingly disobeyed God, he made all kinds of excuses, and I prophesied the end of Saul's kingship. Because of Saul's disobedience, the Amalekites continued to torment the Israelites for hundreds of years until the time of Haman, the enemy of Queen Esther. Perhaps King Agag of the Amalekites, can be seen as a symbol of sin in our own lives. We are instructed to completely eliminate it, not make excuses for it, not let it keep on existing to torment us and our families. Rather than be like Saul, who let the symbol of sin live, maybe do what I did. I hacked Agag to pieces.

God searched for a man after his own heart, and found a shepherd boy, I anointed him as the next king many years before he actually became king.

King Saul:

Nearly every young person fantasizes about being a king or queen. But I did not. I was quite content to be a farmer. However, when God called me to be king, I followed his command.

My first job was to unite the twelve tribes of Israel under my command. This was a bigger task than you would imagine. For hundreds of years, each tribe ruled itself. Each tribe relied upon its elders to set the rules, enact justice, and train farmers to act as soldiers. Overcoming and replacing these traditional tribal leaders was an immense task.

My second job was to prepare the Israelites to withstand the Philistines, and then to defeat the Philistines. I spent my entire kingship fighting the Philistines and other enemies of the Israelites. That probably sounds like a trivial order, but you have no idea of some of the underlying factors involved.

One of my biggest challenges was that the Israelites had been under the dominion of the Philistines long enough that the Philistines completely controlled the iron making. Israelites had virtually no iron weapons, and even depended on the Philistines for iron plow tips. And, our people were used to being farmers, not soldiers. However, we overcame all of that and became formidable enemies.

You've heard of my debacle with the Amalekites. I finally confessed to my disobedience, but God could see that my heart was hard. Through Samuel, God went ahead and chose my successor. Much to my dismay, my successor was not going to be my own son, but a shepherd, named David.

God completely blessed David. He became my most valuable soldier. Under his leadership, my soldiers started turning the tide against the Philistines. The more successful David was, the more jealous I became. My jealousy got so bad, it possessed me, literally — a violent evil spirit entered me. So violent. And David was my sole target.

Jonathan, my son, became best friends with David. Ironic twist? David married my daughter after he and his men were able to defeat the Philistines. Ironic twist, again. My daughter and my son helped David escape my murderous attempts. This allowed him to go to the countryside and amass a band of renegade soldiers. I chased him. Relentlessly. Didn't matter, he always escaped. God, my countrymen, and my family conspired to end my potential dynasty.

I had been king for forty years, it was clear to me that I needed to try to defeat the Philistines once and for all. Please notice that I said it was clear to me. Because of my debacle with the Amalekites, Samuel had refused to communicate with me before his death. I could not rely on his direction from God, so I felt like I had to rely on my own decisions.

I amassed the entire nation of Israel and prepared to fight the Philistines on Mount Gilboa. I was certain that Israel was finally strong enough to defeat our enemies. I even chose the terrain so that the Philistines could not take advantage of using chariots, which we did not have. I thought I had everything under control.

The army of Israel was slaughtered. I was killed. Three of my sons were killed. It was certain that my family would not continue as a dynasty. David did not take away the dynasty from my family. I did it myself.

I did not try to amass great wealth, I did not lead my people into idolatry, I did not tax my people unfairly. I believe I did a good job of fighting our country's enemies. I unified the tribes of Israel so that the next king would have a good base to build his kingdom. Was I a good king or a bad king, what do you think?

I did all this with very little direction from Samuel. If he had spent more time mentoring me or teaching me to make godly decisions, perhaps I would have done better. Unfortunately, I did disobey God from time to time. However, I did not lead anybody into worship of any false god. I was insanely jealous of David, my anointed successor, but no harm really ever came to him because of it.

I never wanted to be king. I didn't ask for it. I was a farmer. A good one. But a good king or a bad king? Who's to say?