

I am Samuel.

I suppose most of you have heard my story – which really starts with my father Elkanah and my mother Hannah. You see, my father did something I would never recommend – he married two women, my mother and Peninnah. That created all kinds of problems. When my mother did not have any children, Peninnah made her life miserable.

Every year my family went to Shiloh to worship God. Shiloh was the religious capital of Israel before David moved it to Jerusalem. It was there that Eli the priest saw my mother praying fervently for a child, and he thought she was drunk because she was sort of talking to herself. But she explained her situation, and promised that if God would only give her a son, she would dedicate him to Yahweh. Eli promised her what she wanted – a baby boy. And here I am.

Well, my mother fulfilled her vow, and she brought me to the house of God in Shiloh. I was raised as a Nazirite – like Samson, one of the other famous judges of Israel. So I did not drink any strong wine, and no razor touched my head all the days of my life. Every year my mother brought me a robe, when she came to worship, and this reminded me of the great love she had for me and to God. Imagine, giving your own son up as a dedication to God.

When I was a young man, God first spoke to me. I remember it like it was only yesterday. I was lying down to sleep, when I heard a voice calling my name. I thought it was Eli; at this time, he was nearly blind, and I was helping to take care of him. Then it happened again. Finally, Eli realized it was God calling to me, and he told me to lie still and answer, “Speak; for your servant hears.” Then God spoke to me, telling me that the house of Eli would be punished because of his wicked sons. God prophesied through me that both of them would die on the same day.

In the Bible, it says of me, “*Samuel grew, and Yahweh was with him, and let none of his words fall to the ground.*” I like that saying, that I did not let any of God’s words fall to the ground. Do you know what that means? I treasured every one of them, and kept them safely stored in my heart. God also revealed himself to me directly – what a blessing I had!

During most of my life, the main enemy of Israel was the Philistines. Samson had dealt them a strong blow, but they came back stronger than ever. I still dread thinking about the battle at Ebenezer. On the first day, we lost 4,000 good men. So men came and took the Ark of the Covenant into battle. The sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, marched with it. We were so sure that we would win; we raised such a shout that the ground shook from the noise. But God was not with us that day - we lost a great battle, with 30,000 men dying, and the Philistines – those uncircumcised heathen – captured the Ark. The sons of Eli were killed.

When Eli heard about it, he fell over backwards, broke his neck, and died; he was 98 years old, blind, and a heavy man. . And the wife of Phinehas, when she heard the terrible news, went into labor, delivering a baby boy, and died. Before she died she named him Ichabod, which means “no glory”, saying that on this terrible day the glory had departed from Israel. So we cried and mourned the loss of the God’s Holy Ark to the Philistines.

But God worked wonders among the Philistines, causing the men around the Ark to get tumors, and their idols crashed down overnight, and some men even died. The Philistines figured out that it was the Ark that was cursing them, and they returned it to us. So we recovered the ark without lifting a sword – it was the mighty hand of God at work. Unfortunately, when the ark was returned, the men of Beth Shemesh looked into it – this was forbidden, and God killed over 50,000 of our men that day – more than we had lost in battle! As the Bible says, *“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”*

After several years, we finally broke the bonds of the Philistines. God confused their armies with great thunder, and we were able to rout them good. That was a great day for Israel.

When I was an old man, and my sons, Joel and Abijah, like the sons of Eli, were also wicked. I am sorry to say that they loved money, and took bribes while serving in the tabernacle. So the elders of Israel asked for a king. This displeased me very much; I gave the people the warning from Yahweh himself:

“This will be the way of the king who shall reign over you: he will take your sons, and appoint them to him, for his chariots, and to be his horsemen; and they shall run before his chariots; and he will appoint them to him for captains of thousands, and captains of fifties; and he will assign some to plow his ground, and to reap his harvest, and to make his instruments of war, and the instruments of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers, and to be cooks, and to be bakers. He will take your fields, and your vineyards, and your olive groves, even their best, and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your seed, and of your vineyards, and give to his officers, and to his servants. He will take your male servants, and your female servants, and your best young men, and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks: and you shall be his servants. You shall cry out in that day because of your king whom you shall have chosen you; and Yahweh will not answer you in that day.”

Still, the people persisted - and God allowed it. I told every man to return his city while God found a king for Israel.

I Am Saul.

My father, Kish, was from the tribe of Benjamin; in the Bible he was called a “mighty man of valor”. He gave me a good upbringing. And as a young man I was a very good son to Kish. The Bible says of me in the book of I Samuel, Chapter 9 that I was “... *an impressive young man; and there was not among the children of Israel a better person than he. From his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people.*” Yes, I was young, and tall, and strong.

When my father lost his donkeys, I took a servant and went looking for them. I had just about given up on finding them, when my servant told me about Samuel. He said, “See now, there is in this city a man of God, and he is a man who is held in honor. All that he says comes surely to pass. Now let us go there.” The funny thing it seemed like he knew we were coming.

I did know you were coming! God had told revealed it to me the day before.

I knew it! When I saw you, you told me, “*Go up before me to the high place, for you shall eat with me today. In the morning I will let you go, and will tell you all that is in your heart. As for your donkeys who were lost three days ago, don’t set your mind on them; for they are found. For whom is all that is desirable in Israel? Is it not for you, and for all your father’s house?*”

I had no idea why I was picked to be the king. First of all, the tribe of Benjamin was one of the smallest tribes in Israel. And my family was small. So I was shocked when you took oil and anointed me, and said that I was to be the prince over all the inheritance of Yahweh.

Imagine my surprise, when we cast lots to prove to Israel that you were chosen by God, and you could not be found. You were so afraid of the responsibility that you hid among the luggage!

Yes, it took a while to sink in. I did not start acting like a king for some time. I even went back and was plowing our fields behind my oxen. But when the Ammonites rose up against the men of Jabesh Gilead, and threatened to poke their right eyes out, I decided “enough was enough”. I cut up my oxen, and sent the meat in pieces throughout all of Israel. The dread of Yahweh came upon the people, and they rose up as one man. We raised an army of 330,000 men, and with God’s help we saved Jabesh Gilead and scattered the Ammonites.

Yes, your kingship was good – for about two years. Then it all fell apart.

Yes, the story of my life and leadership is rather sad. It all fell apart, as Samuel said, two years into my reign. The Philistines came up against Israel with a great army. As the ancient scrolls say, they had. *"...thirty thousand chariots, and six thousand horsemen, and people as the sand which is on the seashore in multitude."* We were hiding in caves, thickets, and among the rocks. I was waiting for Samuel to come to Gilgal, to make an offering to God before the battle. But when Samuel did not arrive at the appointed time, I made the burnt offering myself.

I can still hear your words to me that day – they are burned into my memory, and captured in the sacred scriptures. "You have done foolishly. You have not kept the commandment of Yahweh your God, which he commanded you; for now Yahweh would have established your kingdom on Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not continue. Yahweh has sought for himself a man after his own heart, and Yahweh has appointed him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept that which Yahweh commanded you."

Oh how I wish I could go back and live my life over again! If I could go back to that day and start over, the history of Israel might be so different!

Well, that was what people today might say, "The beginning of the end for you, King Saul".

Yes, it was. But I am sorry now to admit that this was the beginning in a long line of bad actions on my part. Oh, I had by better times – with my son Jonathan at my side, we defeated many enemies - the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Philistines, and the Ammonites.

But my next big mistake happened when we up to fight Amalek. You had given me my instructions from Yahweh very clearly – *"Now go and strike Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and don't spare them; but kill both man and woman, infant and nursing baby, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."*

Under my direction, we assembled 200,000 soldiers – the best of Israel and Judah. We struck those Amalekites, from Havilah to Shur. We destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword, as Yahweh commanded.

Not all the people – you spared Agag, the king. You also kept the best of the spoils – cattle, sheep, fatlings, lambs, and all that was good. The word of Yahweh came to me, saying, *"It grieves me that I have set up Saul to be king; for he is turned back from following me, and has not performed my commandments."* I was angry; and I cried to Yahweh all night long.

You don't have to remind me. I look back on those times now and realize the drastic error that I made. I led myself and all the people astray. Oh, I tried to justify it, saying that we had reserved the best of everything to sacrifice to Yahweh. But when I saw you coming, and I saw the look on your face, I knew what it meant. I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

All of you listening today – the story of my life is a valuable lesson for you. I can't undo what I did when I was the first King of Israel, but it is not too late for you to change your ways. I cannot go back and live my life over again. But you still have time.

The words that Samuel told me are still burned into my memory. I tried to justify my actions, but Samuel cut to the chase. Do you remember what you told me?

"Has Yahweh as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying Yahweh's voice? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams."

I was guilty – guilty of rebellion and stubbornness. Because I rejected Yahweh's word, he also rejected me from being king.

"Yahweh tore the kingdom of Israel from you that day, and gave it to another who was better than you."

Yes – I am glad for the nation of Israel that their next king was a better man than I was. I am sorry to say this was not the end of my bad behavior.

There is no question that I abused the power God had entrusted to me. When I had people serving and honoring me, pride crept into my heart. In time, this type of "star treatment" made me believe that I really was something special and worthy of praise. When this happened, I forgot that God is the one who is really in control and that He alone rules over all. God may have chosen me initially because I was humble, but over time that humility was replaced by a self-serving and destructive pride that destroyed my rule.

I did not pay attention to Yahweh when He told our forefathers in the desert about this time when we would set kings up. He said

"Now it shall come about when he (a king) sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. It shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left, so that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel. (Deuteronomy 17:18-20 NASB)"

All of you have a wonderful blessing – you can learn from my mistakes. History does not look upon me with kindness. But please remember that I was not always a bad man – I started out good, but the temptations of power and wealth corrupted my actions. I put other things ahead of God. I put myself ahead of Yahweh. And I paid the price for this.

Yes, remember the example of King Saul. I mourned for you, King Saul; and God grieved that he had made you king.

If you remember anything from our lives, let it be this. We must not put ourselves ahead of God. And that is so easy to do, with all of our worries about money, relationships, our health, and many other such things. But in the end, all of that is meaningless if God is not the center of our lives.

Just as I did, you have the temptation of wanting to live your lives as you want. And you have the temptation of wanting to worship God as you want, not as He has instructed. I went through the motions of making a sacrifice; but it was not acceptable to Yahweh God. Similarly, you can go through the motions, worshiping God as you desire, not according to His will and with all your heart.

As our Lord Jesus said, *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven; but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will tell me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in your name, in your name cast out demons, and in your name do many mighty works?’ Then I will tell them, ‘I never knew you. Depart from me, you who work iniquity.’”*

Remember that to obey is better than sacrifice.

If you want to submit fully to God, we invite you to do that now.