

PROFILE
OF
GOD

by

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Thus says the Lord:

“Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom,
let not the mighty man glory in his might,
nor let the rich man glory in his riches;

But let him who glories glory in this,
that he understands and knows Me,
that I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness,
judgment, and righteousness in the earth.

For in these I delight,” says the Lord.

*Jeremiah 9:23,24**

Deep within the heart of God is a desire for His people to know Him. Of course, our present view of God can only be dim; not until we see Him face to face will we be able to know Him as we are now known by Him (*1 Corinthians 13:12*). Nonetheless, the Bible has been given to reveal to us the nature of God, as well as His ways and purposes on earth.

I have found during a recent reading of the book of 1 Samuel some brushstrokes which paint for me a partial but distinctive outline of the profile of God. These I share with you, with my prayer that you might further glory in your understanding of Him.

*All scriptures are taken from the New King James Version.

Contents

God Responds to Brokenness (*1 Samuel 1:1 - 2:21*)

God Must Be Feared (*1 Samuel 2:22 - 7:1*)

God Is In Control (*1 Samuel 9 and 10*)

God's Way Is Best (*1 Samuel 8, 11 and 12*)

God Requires Obedience (*1 Samuel 13 - 15*)

God Does Not See As Man Sees (*1 Samuel 16 and 17*)

When God Departs (*1 Samuel 16 - 31*)

God Responds to Brokenness

1 Samuel 1:1 – 2:21

As she trudged slowly up the dusty path to Shiloh, Hannah wondered if the aching in her chest meant her heart was really breaking. She glanced at her husband's back, a short distance ahead, and recalled their first days together. How much in love they had been, and how confident that God would bless their marriage in every way, including children. In a nation where many had turned from God, Elkanah had committed himself to remain faithful to all his father and grandfather had taught him.

It was because of this commitment that their family was making the annual journey to Shiloh, where God had instructed them to celebrate the Feast of the Passover. Family, thought Hannah. For a number of years, it had been just Elkanah and her. But as the Feasts went by, it became evident that for a reason she simply could not comprehend, God had not blessed her with even one child. Reluctantly, she understood that her husband needed offspring and tried to be accepting when he took another wife. As the second wife, they both knew Peninnah wasn't Elkanah's favorite—but apparently God preferred her, since He immediately blessed her with a fruitful womb.

Watching Elkanah delight in children that weren't hers was always difficult for Hannah, but somehow these Feast times were especially hard. Maybe it was because those around her were in such a festive mood. Maybe it was because she had to endure one more time the deprecating looks and remarks from those who knew her. Or perhaps it was because here at God's tabernacle she had to confront in a direct way her disappointment that He had chosen to leave her in miserable childlessness.

In previous years she had endured the Feast by sheer force of her will. The crushing pain in her bosom kept her from desiring any of the plentiful food. After the others began their celebrations, she would slip into the shadows to release the aching pressure through silent tears. Of course, she couldn't hide her grief from Elkanah. He loved her deeply and always provided her with a double portion to offer to the Lord. He too did not understand why Hannah had been put under the curse of barrenness.

This year, however, Hannah simply could no longer pretend it didn't hurt. Soon after reaching the Feast, she began to weep openly. Elkanah pulled her aside and asked her why she wept, why she couldn't eat. "Am I not better to you than ten sons?"

But Hannah couldn't explain it to him. Instead, she fled to the entrance of the tabernacle and, falling to the ground, bared every fiber of her weary soul to the Lord. After what may have been a long time, her pain began to be replaced by a faint peace. There, near the altar of Yahweh, she somehow not only sensed His presence, but knew He had not forsaken her.

Overwhelmed by this fresh awareness of the reality of God, Hannah's spirit grew bold. She no longer felt the ocean of self pity that had dominated her life for years. Nor did she feel the grief of not being able to present a son to her beloved husband. Instead, a new feeling engulfed her: the desire to give something precious to God Himself.

So Hannah made a vow. If God would give her the thing she most longed for, a male child, she would return the child to Him for all the days of his life. Even as she silently spoke her promise, Hannah was amazed at the wonderful peace she felt. It made no sense, to ask for something she didn't intend to keep. But somehow at the same time it made more sense than anything else she'd ever said or done.

A voice startled her out of her thoughts. It was Eli, the old priest. Hannah hadn't noticed him, but he must have been there for some time. "How long will you be drunk?"

At first his words confused her. Drunk? She'd never had an excess of wine in her life. Then she realized how strange she must look. In the middle of a holiday, here she was, alone, in the dust, with dirty tear-stained cheeks. Moreover, she'd been conversing pretty directly with God, something proper Hebrew women didn't usually do.

So she explained her sorrow, hoping he would believe her. "Out of the abundance of my complaint and grief I have spoken ... until ...now...." She stopped. It was different ... *now*. But how could she expect him to understand what it was like now?

Yet miraculously, Eli understood. "Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have asked of Him."

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As the story continues, Hannah "went her way and ate, and was no longer sad." Soon thereafter, Samuel was born, and Hannah faithfully, apparently joyfully, gave him back to the Lord. God in turn blessed her with three more sons and two daughters. Moreover, Samuel grew to be one of the most revered and influential priests in the history of Israel.

Here in the opening scenes of 1 Samuel we have a picture of God's nature as One who responds to brokenness. Hannah's grief may seem excessive to contemporary women, for whom childbearing represents only a portion of their self-worth. But in biblical times, not only was motherhood a wife's highest calling, but barrenness was known to be a curse from God.

Consequently, for Hannah to cast herself before the One who she believed disapproved of her must not have been an easy thing to do. We cannot really know the nature of her thoughts in this personal time of prayer, but it is clear that she moved from a point of despair to a place of hope. Her vow tells us she was able to trust that the God who had long ago removed the curse of barrenness from Sarai could also do it for her.

Further, she was able to receive Eli's blessing with full confidence that it was from God. Even though she'd made no mention of a petition, Eli somehow knew she had asked God for something very specific. This was not self evident, since her sorrow could as easily have been caused by other things, perhaps grief for someone she had lost.

We have no way of assessing the depth of Hannah's faith prior to this poignant encounter with God at Shiloh. However, we are given a picture of the strength of her subsequent confidence in both the sovereignty and the faithfulness of God, expressed in the prayer she offered when Samuel was brought to live in the house of God. At the time, she probably did not know God would give her other children. Yet she proclaimed joyfully, "No one is holy like the Lord, for there is none besides You, nor is there any rock like our God!"

God reveals Himself as One who not only meets us in our brokenness, but who also fills our emptiness with His grace. Even in the face of circumstances that seem to be the opposite of His blessing, faith enables us to relax confidently in His care. We can trust, not only because we accept the power of God, but also because we can discover, as did Hannah, that God always responds to those who rely on Him with a divine outpouring of protection, provision and peace.

God Must Be Feared

1 Samuel 2:22 – 7:1

It was a wooden box, made with human hands. In it were some stones, a stick and a bowl of the strange manna food that had sustained a multitude of people for decades as they journeyed through the wilderness. With the exception of the manna, each of the things in the box began as the common stuff of life. Men had handled them; men had placed them in the box.

Yet this box, known as the ark of the covenant, became a physical focal point where the natural and the supernatural merged. To be sure, the stones, stick and manna had already participated in the miraculous even prior to being placed in the box. The stones contained the law, the specific spoken commandments of Jehovah, carved by Moses on Mount Sinai. The righteous requirements of God were condensed into human language, a comprehensible code of behavior that would test humanity's commitment to the divine.

The stick was Aaron's rod, the tool by which God initiated the terrifying plagues of Egypt that demonstrated to all of history His complete dominance over every aspect of nature. Later, the rod was used to verify the authority granted to Aaron among the tribes of Israel. Each tribe laid out a rod for the testing of God; only Aaron's budded and bloomed.

Beyond the individual holiness of the items within the box, however, was the astonishing fact that God had chosen to fill the box with His own personal glory. It was His place of residence on earth, prior to the coming of Christ.

By the time of Samuel, Israel had experienced many demonstrations of the power that mysteriously attended the ark of the covenant. Yet they had chosen to ignore God and the requirements He placed on them. The corruption of the nation had reached into the very house of God, where Eli was a glutton and his sons were sexually indulgent. God had warned Eli through a prophet that He was not pleased with him and that He was about to remove his family from the priesthood forever. This warning was repeated when God spoke again to Eli through the young boy Samuel. But Eli chose not to change his ways.

Some time later, the Israelites decided to go to war against the Philistines. Unexpectedly, Israel lost the first battle. The elders then made the unprecedented decision to bring the ark of the covenant directly to the battlefield. This terrified the Philistines. But they gathered their courage, realizing how devastating it would be should the Israelites be able to oppress them as they had been oppressed.

To everyone's complete surprise, the Lord did not save His people. Israel lost tens of thousands of soldiers. Eli's sons, who accompanied the ark, were both killed. The ark itself was carried away to heathen courts.

If the ark were merely a wooden box, even a sacred symbol of the Hebrew's faith, this would probably have been the end of the story. Instead, it was the residence of the Spirit of God, and while He had permitted His people to undergo defeat, He Himself was as invincible as ever.

The Philistines, astonished and elated, laid the ark as a trophy before their highest god, Dagon, who was worshipped as the father of Baal. The following morning, however, when the priests began their daily rituals, they discovered the statue of Dagon face down before the ark of the Lord. Greatly concerned, they carefully restored their idol to its proper position. The next day, not only was Dagon found prostrate before the Lord, his head and hands had been broken from his torso.

Soon after this the people in the surrounding region began to experience a terrifying plague, which brought death to many and some sort of tumors to many others. Realizing this might be the consequence of their possession of the ark, they hurriedly transported it to a neighboring city. The plague followed to the second city, and then to a third.

In great despair, the Philistine lords consulted with their priests and diviners. These men gave two instructions. First, the ark should be sent home with a trespass offering to appease and glorify the God of Israel. Second, the ark should be carried on a new cart drawn by two cows who had nursing calves. It would require a supernatural influence to persuade these animals to travel away from their young.

Regrettably, these heathen priests seem to have had a clearer sense of the nature of God than did His own people. The cows traveled without wavering to the Israelite town of Beth Shemesh. There the ark was greeted with great jubilation. However, some of the men of Beth Shemesh decided to look into this sacred box. Seventy people died immediately; thereafter the Lord in His wrath slew an additional fifty thousand.

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God wants to be feared. Today we tend to dilute the meaning of the fear of God, using such phrases as “reverent awe.” It is hard for us to comprehend the absolute holiness, the uncompromising righteousness, the unparalleled power and authority and sanctity of the Lord of Hosts.

Yet the God of the Old Testament is the God of the New Testament—and the God of today. He still requires absolute purity, absolute obedience. Wonderfully, His mercy has made provision in Christ for the covering of our fallenness and redemption from our rebellion. But unless we are able to embrace the terror of His holiness, we will never truly understand the miracle of His love.

God Is In Control

1 Samuel 9 and 10

An ordinary task, on an ordinary day. His father's donkeys had wandered away, and Saul had been told to go look for them. He probably didn't anticipate any problem finding the animals, since he and his servant took only enough food for a couple days. Perhaps the donkeys often strayed.

The two men headed south. The terrain was mountainous, so it is likely the donkeys had left no trail to follow. Their choices of direction must have been fairly random; maybe they challenged each other to think like a donkey! No doubt they were like most young men, pleased with an opportunity to leave the confines of home to wander freely across the countryside.

After two days of searching, however, it occurred to Saul that his father might no longer be concerned for the missing donkeys, but instead might be worried about his missing son. At that point they were drawing near to a town, which Saul recognized as the home of a prophet of God. How fortunate! Why not ask the man of God where the donkeys were?

As soon as he said it, however, Saul realized there was a problem. With their food gone, they had nothing with which to pay the seer for his assistance. But his servant spoke up, confessing to having brought a small coin with him. Saul, the son of a wealthy man, may have never needed to concern himself with practical matters. The servant, on the other hand, was probably better acquainted with life's realities and thus had wisely prepared for the unexpected. In any event, Saul was pleased with the solution to their quandary, and they hurried ahead to see if they could locate the prophet.

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So opens the story, from Saul's point of view. God's perspective was entirely different. While Saul and his companion were still a day's journey away, God had spoken to Samuel. "Tomorrow about this time I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him commander over My people Israel." As far as Saul knew, he was sent out by his father, but beyond that each choice of direction and of the speed of their travel was entirely his. There is no indication he had heard anything from the Lord.

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The first people Saul and his servant encountered as they neared the city were some maidens coming out to draw water. When the men inquired about the seer, they were told he had just that day arrived at the city and was on his way to the high place to offer a sacrifice. Apparently Saul didn't know that Samuel traveled between several cities as the judge of Israel and was only home for a limited time each year.

As they continued toward the city, they met Samuel, who was coming out toward them. Not realizing who he was, Saul asked him for directions to the prophet's house. Samuel's answer must have been most surprising.

“I am the seer. Go up before me to the high place, for you shall eat with me today; and tomorrow I will let you go and will tell you all that is in your heart. But as for your donkeys that were lost three days ago, do not be anxious about them, for they have been found. And on whom is all the desire of Israel found? Is it not on you and on all your father’s house?”

Following this pronouncement, Samuel led the astonished Saul up to the high place and into a hall where the ceremonial feast had been prepared. The prophet then seated Saul in the place of honor and told the cook to give him a special portion of meat he had earlier been instructed to prepare. There were about thirty other people present, perhaps officials from the city.

Later that evening, back at his house, Samuel took Saul up to the roof for a long talk. No doubt it was to reveal “all that was in his heart,” as had been promised. The next morning, Samuel privately anointed Saul as king. Not even Saul’s servant witnessed the event. Then, as they prepared to depart, the prophet again gave evidence of God’s sovereign control over the events in Saul’s life.

In explicit detail, Samuel told the young man that he would meet two men by Rachel’s tomb, who would bring him word that the donkeys had been found. Thereafter, by a certain tree, he’d meet three more men carrying food and animals to sacrifice. These men would offer him bread, which he was to receive from them. Following this, on a specific hill, Saul would encounter a group of prophets, who would be playing instruments and prophesying following their worship at the high place.

“Then the Spirit of the Lord will come upon you, and you will prophesy with them and be turned into another man. And let it be, when these signs come to you, that you do as the occasion demands; for God is with you.”

“...So it was, when he had turned his back to go from Samuel, that God gave him another heart; and all those signs came to pass that day.”

Yet even after his spirit infilling, his conversion to “another man,” Saul resisted God’s assignment. After returning home, an uncle asked Saul what Samuel had told him. Saul simply answered, “He told us plainly that the donkeys had been found.”

Some time later, Samuel called the people together to present to them their king. As was the pattern in Old Testament times when one individual was to be singled out, they went through an elaborate process of elimination. First the tribe, then the family, then the household, then the individual were chosen, probably by casting lots. But at the final moment, Saul could not be found. God Himself had to reveal Saul’s hiding place behind some equipment, so Samuel could at last introduce him to his future subjects.

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What an amazing picture of the sovereignty of God! Israel’s first king was elected by one vote: God’s alone. Saul did not volunteer. He was not even asked his preference in the matter. Nor was the selection made by the people. Rather, by an elaborate series of signs, God chose to verify to

Saul, to the people and to all of history that earthly authority is divinely delegated. Moreover, God clearly demonstrated His ability to control every aspect of human affairs, even the most mundane.

God involves Himself in our lives at every level, whether or not we are aware of His presence. What is more, His purposes are always accomplished. As Saul later discovered, rebellion against God's revealed assignment is an option, but it yields painful consequences. And somehow, even in the face of rebellion by individuals, God never compromises or dilutes His master design.

God has everything under control. When through arrogance, or simply through ignorance, we consider our lives and our decisions to be entirely our own, we forfeit the wonderful opportunity to align ourselves with God's will. Nowhere else, however, can we find true significance, true fulfillment or true security—except in the center of God's wise and gracious plan.

God's Way Is Best

1 Samuel 8, 11 and 12

“Give us a king! Give us a king!” The children of Israel knew what they wanted. It was plain enough to them that Samuel’s sons could not be trusted. They were dishonest, greedy, and indifferent to justice. What’s more, other nations had kings to lead them into battle. Somehow the Israelites weren’t satisfied with a clergyman as their commander-in-chief.

Their demand distressed old Samuel. He realized the people were being unwise. Yet if he protested, they’d accuse him of simply wanting to insure a position of honor for his sons. It was a hard decision, one he knew should be passed along to God. So Samuel prayed to the Lord.

God’s response must have surprised him. To begin, God told him to give the people exactly what they had asked for. However, God explained, Samuel should not feel personally rejected, since it was not the prophet, but God, against whom the Israelites were rebelling. Moreover, despite His displeasure at the stubbornness of His people, God mercifully told Samuel to warn them of the enormous price their choice would require. A king would demand the best of their crops and herds, the best of their servants and their children, for his own whims. Far beyond the greed of Samuel’s sons, a king could require the very lives of anyone and everyone he desired.

But the Israelites were determined to have their way. So, as we have seen, God sovereignly chose a handsome young man to be their king, and divinely empowered him with His Spirit. Following the public identification and appointment of Saul as king, however, Samuel sent everyone home. Instead of initiating Saul’s reign with ceremony, God elected to begin it with action.

Soon after Saul’s appointment, the Ammonites besieged one of the Israelite cities, Jabesh Gilead, threatening not only to enslave the people, but to humiliate them by putting out their right eyes. The elders of Jabesh entreated the Ammonites to give them seven days, during which they would send out a call for help from the surrounding Israelite tribes. If no help came, they would submit to their enemies.

Apparently the Ammonites did not consider this much of a threat, because they agreed to the request. It is possible that as a kingless society, the Israelites had become disunified and therefore vulnerable to abusive treatment by other nations. In fact, when the other Israelites were notified of the plight of their fellow countrymen, they simply “lifted up their voices and wept.” Nevertheless, something had changed. God had given them a king.

“Then the Spirit of God came upon Saul when he heard this news, and his anger was greatly aroused. So he took a yoke of oxen and cut them in pieces, and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel by the hands of messengers, saying, ‘Whoever does not go out with Saul and Samuel to battle, so it shall be done to his oxen.’ And the fear of the Lord fell on the people, and they came out with one consent.”

Not surprisingly, the Lord and His chosen leader won a stunning victory that day. From the viewpoint of the people, it was not divine intervention this time (no fire from heaven or blindness in

the enemy camp), but simply a good battle strategy by Saul that defeated the foe. It was an event that unified them and promoted a strong sense of loyalty. Realizing this, Samuel told the people, “Come, let us go to Gilgal and renew the kingdom there.” Saul was at last to be crowned as king.

It was, however, a rather unusual coronation. Samuel began by challenging the people to testify of any mistreatment they had received at his hand. No one made any accusation. He continued with a review of the mighty works God had performed in behalf of their forefathers in the days of Moses and Aaron. He then pointedly recounted a more recent story of Israel’s rebellion, when they worshipped other gods and God sold them into the hands of the Philistines. Yet when the children of Israel cried out, God sent the great judges to deliver them from their enemies.

Today, continued Samuel to the assembled throng, you have decided that God’s appointed judges are no longer sufficient. You have a better idea. Behold, God has agreed to give you what you want. Here is your king. However, heed this well. If you are obedient to God, then your king will also follow the Lord, and you will remain under His care. If you rebel, God’s hand will be turned against you, both you and your king.

It was a solemn warning, but Samuel knew it would take more than words to fully communicate the seriousness of what was taking place. Drawing the people’s attention to the ripe wheat standing ready for harvest, Samuel called out to the Lord to send thunder and rain, that they might perceive the magnitude of their wickedness in asking for a king.

It must have been a terrifying storm; it left the people deathly afraid of both God and Samuel. They finally realized the wrongness of their choice. With one voice, they cried out to Samuel, “Pray for your servants to the Lord your God, that we may not die; for we have added to all our sins the evil of asking a king for ourselves.”

Here we find a marvelous picture of God’s nature as simultaneously righteous and merciful. The people stood in full recognition of their rebellion, knowing they deserved to die. Yet the God who had called them as His own people desired more than anything for them to follow Him in obedience. Speaking through Samuel, God responded from a heart of love.

“Do not fear. You have done all this wickedness; yet do not turn aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart. And do not turn aside; for then you would go after empty things which cannot profit or deliver, for they are nothing.”

How very simple; how magnificently profound. The Lord is God. There is no other solution to life’s difficulties. There is no other source of blessing. God’s people, in Samuel’s time and today, are simply not able to imagine or contrive a better plan for their lives than that of their loving Creator. He wants to be our king. He wants the very best for us, as we learn, albeit with faltering steps, to trust Him.

Even Samuel realized how much God desired the loyalty of His people and how anxious He was to go forward with a renewed covenant of commitment. Samuel might, with some justification, have

reached the limit of his patience with the ungrateful people he had served for so many years. Instead, the man of God reflected the divine nature in his own.

“As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you; but I will teach you the good and the right way. Only fear the Lord, and serve Him in truth with all your heart; for consider what great things He has done for you.”

God Requires Obedience

1 Samuel 13 – 15

So at last Israel had their king. But even as Saul's kingdom was birthed in the rebellion of the people, in rebellion it continued. Samuel had cautioned Israel at Saul's coronation, "If you fear the Lord and serve Him and obey His voice, and do not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then both you and the king who reigns over you will continue following the Lord your God." If *they* obeyed, so would their king. Apparently, they did not.

As mentioned earlier, part of the urgency of Israel's desire for a king was due to ongoing oppression by the Philistines who lived among them. Saul knew that as king, he would be responsible to lead the Israelites in war. Accordingly, he and his oldest son Jonathan gathered together a few thousand soldiers, and Jonathan attacked one of the Philistine camps, presumably to stir things up. Then Saul sent out a call for the Hebrews to assemble for battle.

It seems, however, that his military intelligence sources must have been faulty. Whatever the quantity of Israelites that gathered, they were vastly outnumbered by the Philistines, who were "as the sand which is on the seashore in multitude." The Philistines also had thousands of horses and chariots, and ample metal weaponry. The Israelite arsenal, by comparison, consisted of two swords, one for Saul and one for Jonathan. It was not an even match.

Quite understandably, the Hebrews panicked. They hid in caves, in thickets, in holes—some even fled over the Jordan to the neighboring lands. Saul and those with him hunkered down in Gilgal to wait for Samuel, who for some reason had set a waiting period of seven days before he would join Saul.

On the seventh day, Saul could stand no more. He decided to offer sacrifices to the Lord himself, in supplication for divine assistance. Because he was not a priest, such action was of course strictly prohibited. Sure enough, while the meat was still smoldering, Samuel showed up. He was not impressed with Saul's excuses. On the contrary, he announced to Saul that because of his disobedience, God would not pass the kingdom on to Saul's sons, but would raise up another king "after His own heart." Then Saul left.

What followed was a strange exhibition of insubordination. While Saul sat under a pomegranate tree to mull over his future plans with the six hundred men still with him, Jonathan took it upon himself to carry on with the battle. Realizing the Lord might yet choose to deliver the Philistines to them, he and his armor-bearer sneaked over to the enemy camp. Unlike his father, Jonathan recognized that God could save "by many or by few." So he decided to set up a test, to see if the Lord would go with him into battle.

God always responds to faith. Not only did He meet Jonathan's test condition, He enabled the two men to kill twenty Philistines within a half acre of land. Then He sent an enormous earthquake, frightening away the vast Philistine multitude.

Saul, meanwhile, had decided to send a priest who was with him for the ark of God, probably as another attempt to invoke God's assistance. But when they heard and felt the earthquake, he changed his plans. Pursuing the Philistines, Saul, Jonathan and the remaining Israelites were able to win a great victory.

Earlier that day, however, Saul had made another decision: he had forced his people to fast by placing under a curse any man who ate food until he took vengeance on his enemies. Unaware of his father's oath, Jonathan tasted some wild honey. Yet when he was told of the oath, Jonathan remained unrepentant. In fact, he reasoned with those around him that *they* would be much more effective warriors with food in their stomachs.

This made sense to the people, who immediately tore into the animals they had acquired as spoils of the battle. In their frenzy to get food, they compounded their disobedience to Saul by disobeying the covenant prohibition against eating meat with blood.

When news of their activities reached Saul, he was concerned. But typically he tried to patch things up himself. He sent word for the soldiers to bring the animals first to an altar (which he himself built), that they might properly slaughter the animals there, a process which included ceremonial bleeding. Then he and the priest petitioned God, to see whether God would bless an effort to further pursue the Philistines. Not surprisingly, God did not respond.

The final scene in this panorama of disorder occurred when Saul sought to know who had broken the fast and therefore should receive the consequences of the curse. Since no one would tell him, he was forced to cast lots. He put all the Israelites on one side, and stood with his son Jonathan on the other. Very much to his surprise, the lot fell on his side of the line. With shaking hands, he again cast the lot, which fell of course to Jonathan.

Jonathan, understanding the solemn weight of such a curse, acknowledged that he had eaten the honey and therefore must die. The people, however, overruled everyone and would not allow their newfound hero to be put to death. So Jonathan lived, and the whole assembly went home.

Overall, Saul's reign was not a pleasant experience for the Israelites. As the Bible records, "There was fierce war with the Philistines all the days of Saul. And when Saul saw any strong man or any valiant man, he took him for himself."

Although Saul had by disobedience lost the kingdom for his sons, God supported him for a time, giving him counsel through Samuel. But eventually an act of direct rebellion prompted the complete severance of Saul's authority under God.

The Amalekites had been for years a target of God's wrath, ever since they had without justification attacked the children of Israel on their way up from Egypt. So God commanded Saul through Samuel to utterly annihilate their tribe—man, woman, child and beast. The battle went well; Saul could have done exactly as God had asked. But instead, he and the people modified God's plan, saving out the best of the livestock and also sparing the life of Agag, the Amalekite king.

For some reason, Saul had no clue this would displease God. Instead, he built himself a monument to record his achievement, then paraded down to Samuel to report on their great victory. Samuel, however, was in no mood for celebrating. God had told him the day before of Saul's rebellion, and Samuel had spent the night in prayer and tears.

Ever the man of God, Samuel reflected once more the divine perspective. After years of patience, God had reached His limit. Despite Saul's protests that the people had only taken the best animals for sacrifices, Samuel's pronouncement of God's judgment on the matter was unflinching and resonates down through history.

“Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He also has rejected you from being king.”

After that day, Samuel never went back to Saul. But even in the finality of judgment, Scripture records that “Samuel mourned for Saul.” God requires of us absolute obedience, yet He never forces us to obey. His heart's desire is for our voluntary submission to His will, our deliberate trust in His goodness, our active faith in His power, and our grateful response to His love.

God Does Not See As Man Sees

1 Samuel 16 and 17

Darkness so quickly renders us helpless. The bravest man is stopped short when his vision is gone. For Samuel, Saul's falling away left him defeated as well. We are not told how long he mourned, but apparently with the mourning was a great deal of discouragement. So when God presented His next assignment to Samuel, the anointing of a new king, Samuel's response was uncharacteristic fear: "If Saul hears, he will kill me."

Ignoring the protest, God sent him on his way to Bethlehem with a horn of oil. Ironically, not only was Samuel afraid to go to Bethlehem, they were afraid to see him come. Evidently the rebellion of the king had left the entire nation in great distress. No one knew when the wrath of God might visit them again, nor what form it might take.

Needless to say, the Bethlehemites were greatly relieved when Samuel told them he had come to offer sacrifices to the Lord. He did not mention God's decision to appoint one of Jesse's sons as the next king.

As Jesse's family gathered together with other families from Bethlehem, Samuel looked eagerly over the young men, wondering who God's choice might be. Recalling the selection of Saul, who stood head and shoulders above the crowd, Samuel's eye settled on Eliab, the eldest. Surely this was God's anointed.

But no. Do not judge by outward appearance, the Lord admonished him. That is man's way. My way is to see the heart of a man. This time, I have selected a leader whose heart is patterned after My own.

One by one, seven sons of Jesse passed by the prophet of Israel. One by one, the Lord told Samuel that this was not His chosen king. Confused, Samuel asked Jesse if he had any more sons. One more, he was told, but he was a mere boy out tending a flock of sheep. Samuel asked them to send for him.

Even though God had cautioned Samuel not to evaluate on the basis of appearance, the Bible tells us that David was good looking, with bright eyes and ruddy cheeks. Upon God's instruction, Samuel stepped forward with his horn of oil and anointed the child in the midst of his brothers. We are not told that he made any statement concerning the significance of the anointing. But from that point forward, the Spirit of God came upon David.

Some time later, the armies of the Philistines came against the Israelites to do battle. Each side gathered on a mountain, with a valley stretched out between them. However, instead of a typical battle charge, the Philistines had a new strategy: they sent one of their warriors down into the valley to challenge any warrior the Israelites might choose. The outcome of the duel would determine the war.

Despite the daylight, all the Israelites saw was darkness. Goliath stood nearly ten feet tall. His armor weighed well over a hundred pounds; his spear weighed more than fifteen. Moreover, his attitude was anything but respectful. For forty days, while the Israelites cowered, Goliath defied them and their God.

But there dwelled in Judah one in whom God's Spirit resided, and who could thus see Goliath as God saw him. David was still too young to be enlisted as a warrior; however, he was occasionally sent by his father to bring food to his three oldest brothers who were part of Saul's army. On one of these trips, David saw and heard Goliath's daily tirade, and immediately his spirit responded in defense of the honor of the God he knew and served.

The story is well known. David questioned the men around him concerning Goliath's challenge, and his noticeable lack of fear was quickly reported to Saul. But when David volunteered to be Israel's representative in the duel, Saul was astonished. "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight him; for you are a youth, and he a man of war from his youth." Ah, appearances.

But David knew that his confidence in God was not presumptuous. As a shepherd, he had single-handedly defended lambs from predatory lions and bears. The same God who delivered the ravaging beasts into his hand could silence this blasphemous Philistine.

Unable to wear comfortably Saul's armor (if nothing else, it was probably several sizes too large), David took only his staff, his sling and five stones into battle. Undaunted by the monster's scorn and curses, David ran forward and slung a stone at Goliath's head, striking him between the eyes.

The Bible records that the stone itself killed Goliath. Nevertheless, David grabbed Goliath's own sword and severed his head, to visually convince the Philistines of their hero's defeat. Thereupon they fled, with the Israelite army in plundering pursuit.

Not the outward appearance. To see as God sees, we must understand the heart of a man. God, who is always the victor, stands beside anyone who is aligned with His righteousness, with His honor with His agenda. Darkness, giants, human weakness or fear—none of these can displace the perfect peace, safety and triumph of those who walk with God.

When God Departs

1 Samuel 16 through 31

Profiles are seen most clearly when light is cast upon a face. However, there is another kind of profile which also gives stark definition to an image: the silhouette. God's nature can be understood not only by its positive qualities, but also by the consequences of His absence.

When Saul was rejected by God following his disobedience with the Amalekites, he nevertheless continued his rule over Israel. "But the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and a distressing spirit from the Lord troubled him." It would seem that spiritual vacancy was not to be Saul's lot. God not only left him, He sent a tormentor in His place.

Hereafter we are given a revealing contrast between David and Saul, between God's presence and God's absence. Even before Saul's attention was fully drawn to David during the encounter with Goliath, his servants had recommended the obscure shepherd boy to their king as a competent musician, whose playing would drive the distressing spirit from him. We are told that not only did David accomplish his musical ministry, but Saul loved him and allowed him to be his armor-bearer.

Some time later, following Goliath's defeat, David was taken into Saul's household and made commander over his army. The young shepherd, through wise behavior and prudent speech, soon became a favorite with all the people of the nation. Saul's son Jonathan found his soul "knitted to" the soul of David, so dearly did he love him, and a profound covenant of devotion was established between them.

Nonetheless, the righteousness in Jonathan that enabled him to respond to God's spirit in David was missing in Saul. Soon thereafter, David triumphantly returned from slaughtering Philistines, and the women began to sing, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands." Saul's response was anger, jealousy and suspicion.

The very next day, the tormenting spirit returned to Saul. Once again, David played his harp, but this time the evil spirit was not to be overcome. Instead, Saul grabbed for a spear and cast it twice at David.

Interestingly, Scripture records that it was Saul, not David, who became afraid. Perhaps God miraculously protected David, removing him from Saul's presence. However, David did not flee Saul's court, but was simply demoted to the leader of a thousand men. It is said that "all Israel and Judah loved David," and that the favor of the Lord continued with him.

Following the entrance of jealousy and fear into Saul's soul, he soon gave way to dishonesty and deviousness. Perhaps in fulfillment of the promise he'd made to anyone who could defeat Goliath, or perhaps just because it seemed to him a good plan, Saul offered David his daughter Merab in marriage, in exchange for David's ongoing efforts as a warrior. Saul hoped that David would be slain by the Philistines in battle.

For a reason that isn't entirely clear, Saul did not keep his word, and Merab was married to another man. Her sister Michal, however, loved David, and Saul decided once again to thus ensnare David. Her dowry, he told David, was simply the foreskins of a hundred Philistines. Surely the combined defeat and humility that would represent to the Philistines would insure David's demise.

But much to Saul's surprise God was with David. He procured the dowry without incident, and the marriage between Michal and David took place. Saul had now yielded the love of two of his children to the man in whom God's Spirit dwelt. Saul not only became even more afraid, but from that point on he became "David's enemy continually."

Saul then admonished all his household servants, and even Jonathan, to look for an opportunity to kill David. For a time Jonathan persuaded his father to reconsider, reminding him of David's great service to him. However, the distressing spirit eventually returned, and Saul once again attempted to pin David to the wall with his spear. David fled to his home, where Michal assisted his escape from the men Saul sent to pursue and kill him.

What followed was a manhunt that absorbed and obsessed Saul to the day of his death. David's first place of refuge was in Ramah with Samuel. We might wonder why he didn't stay there longer; perhaps he did not fully comprehend the depth of Saul's fury. When Saul learned David's whereabouts, he sent three separate groups of men to Ramah to return David to his court. In each instance, when the men entered the presence of God they were unable to fulfill their mission, but were instead overcome by the spirit and began to prophesy.

Finally, Saul decided to go to Ramah himself. But he obviously underestimated the power of the Lord. Not only did he begin prophesying en route, but when he reached the house of Samuel, he stripped off his clothes and for a day and night lay naked, humiliated before the man of God.

Following this David returned to Jonathan. Together they arranged a test to determine the extent of Saul's hostility toward David. Sadly, not only was Saul fully determined to destroy David, he also became violently angry with Jonathan, casting a spear at him as well. The next day Jonathan met secretly with David, to tell him of his danger and to bid him a tearful farewell.

David next went to a town called Nob, where lived Eli's grandson Ahimelech, who was a priest. Unfortunately, the presence of God was not with Ahimelech, since God had rejected Eli's lineage as priests. David was safe enough, but while he was there he was seen by one of Saul's servants, who later reported it to the king. This resulted in another drastic step in Saul's descent. In his anger toward anyone who would assist David, he killed not only eight-five priests in Nob, but also destroyed the entire city.

It is difficult to comprehend the torment that must have driven Saul in his relentless pursuit of one who intended him no evil. With all the resources of his kingdom, he remained unable to capture this relatively unarmed man. To be sure, it was not a pleasant time for David either. He spent many years hiding in caves in the wilderness or in the mountains.

But David not only had the favor of God to support him, he had loyal men who went with him. For a time his parents joined him. Even Jonathan, who accompanied Saul, once slipped into the woods to meet David, and “strengthened his hand in God.” While Saul had given Michal to another man, David acquired two other wives during his exile.

In two instances, Saul actually caught up with David. Both times God protected him, giving the opportunity for destruction to David instead of Saul. But rather than harm God’s anointed, David left Saul untouched. The first time he cut off the corner of Saul’s robe; the second time, he took Saul’s spear and water jug. These choices brought forcefully to Saul the virtue of his enemy. Perhaps the memory of his former love for David tore at his soul. He even blessed David verbally. But reconciliation was no longer an option.

The final step of Saul’s demise occurred some years after Samuel’s death. Saul knew that communication with the dead was strictly forbidden by God; he himself had forced the removal of all spiritists and mediums from his land. Yet the day came when the Philistines once again gathered forces against the Israelites. In great fear, Saul sought the Lord for wisdom through the prophets, through priests, or even directly through dreams. But he learned nothing.

In desperation, he eventually located a medium in En Dor. Disguising himself, he approached the woman, swearing to her by Jehovah that no harm would come to her if she would conduct a séance for him. Somehow, the woman called Samuel’s spirit from the realm of the dead. But even Samuel could give Saul no hope. All Saul gained was the foreknowledge of the next day, when Israel would be captured, and he and his sons would die. God, said Samuel, had not only departed from Saul, but He was his enemy.

In the end, Saul could not even determine his own death. Wounded by Philistine archers, he called upon his armor-bearer to kill him with a sword—not as a matter of honor, but in fear lest his enemy additionally torture him. But the armor-bearer would not, so Saul fell on his own sword. Yet even his suicide may have failed, for later a man reported to David that he had found Saul near death and had dealt him the finishing blow. Not coincidentally, this man was an Amalekite, a remnant of the very tribe God so long ago had commissioned Saul to destroy.

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Without God, there is utter bleakness, utter futility, utter despair. Human wisdom, human strength, human charm, human determination—none of these are of any consequence whatever apart from God. All that was of value to Saul crumbled before the driving demons of jealousy, fear, rage, deception and compromise.

Yet, against this blackness is the glorious contrast of the presence and blessing of God. Hope, peace, joy, significance, loyalty, abiding love: these are the essence of the nature of God, available to those with whom His Spirit dwells.

1995