

George Philip Bible Readings

The Book of Samuel I

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1:1-2

The story is that of Samuel, Saul, and the early years of David. The context is the story of God's chosen people Israel, and His purposes for them and through them. We are studying Old Testament history but what we have to see in all the developments is God Himself working out His purposes of grace and salvation, and raising up men to do His will in their own generation. Samuel was such a man, raised by God at a time of national crisis, and used by God virtually single-handed to turn the nation from its spiritual and moral backsliding and to set it on the road to a creative future. Samuel is rightly called God's emergency man, one of the all time greats (Heb. 11:32); the last of the Judges and the first of the prophets (Acts 13:15-23); who was instrumental in reinstating the Word of God and the awareness of God into the life of the people of God (1 Sam. 3:19-4:1a). He was a man with broad enough vision, deep enough conviction and strong enough courage to stand alone without wavering and he steered the people of God through a time of transition into a new era of spiritual usefulness and service. He was not perfect, as we shall see in 8:1-5, and his sons were a heartbreak. He had to be rebuked at times by God (1 Sam. 16:1); but he was able to challenge the people to testify against him regarding his whole manner of life (1 Sam. 12:1-5). His service spanned fifty years. Keep in mind that the children of Israel were a people specifically chosen by God to be His voice and vehicle of salvation to the nations (Gen. 12:1-3). They had an identity and a purpose which were all of the grace of God and not based on any good in themselves (Deut. 7:6-8). Their blessing and usefulness depended on their being right with God and they were not so. The lessons for our personal lives, for the church and for the nation, are clear and plain in the story.

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1:1-2

The only way to understand the present is to trace how the past has led to it, and for this reason we set the historical context of this whole book. The story begins with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and goes on to tell how Moses led the people out of Egypt at the time of the Exodus and how Joshua led them into the land of Canaan to possess it according to the promise of God. There is a summary of the story in Acts 7:1-45 and we do well to read that long passage to remind ourselves that God is working His purpose out as the generations rise and pass away. That fact is still the key to the interpretation and understanding of history, even though many aspects of the development remain beyond our understanding. The Israelites were commanded by God to be thorough in their dispossessing of the evil powers in the land because, if their obedience was incomplete, these evil peoples would be a snare and a danger to their spiritual life and service (Num. 33:50-55). The story of the Book of Judges testifies to their incomplete and ineffective obedience and by the end of the story of Judges, which covers three hundred years, the situation was disastrous. It was spiritual and moral anarchy (Judg. 21:25). The Word of God, with all its promises of blessing and warnings of judgment, had been forgotten (Deut. 28:1-6,15-19; Josh. 1:7-9). They had sat lightly to it, then ignored it, then rejected it as the way and guide of life. They lived by their own ideas and desires and the consequences were disastrous (Rom. 1:28-32). The most significant thing about the people was that the presence and blessing of God were no longer with them as they had been in the past. The glory had departed (4:21-22). Now, when a nation departs from God that is solemn, but when God departs from a nation that is darkness and disaster. Is this how we should be thinking about and praying for our nation and the church within it at the present time?

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1:3-8

Keep in mind that the story has reached a critical stage and that a significant child was soon to be born and through that child tremendous spiritual changes were to come about. Do we ever think like this when children are born and covenanted to the Lord in our congregations? Do we ever think that we, in our ordinary family situations, have a

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significant part to play in God's purposes? We were introduced in v.1-2 to a very ordinary man who belonged to the people of God but who had allowed his life-style to be moulded and taken over by the spirit of the age. He had two wives, although God's pattern is one man and one woman for life (Gen. 2:18, 22b-24). Of course, when there is no clear vision or understanding of God, the people cast off restraint and go their own way regardless of what God says (Prov. 29:18). But note that Elkanah was also devoutly and orthodoxly religious, walking the twelve miles from home to the sanctuary at Shiloh for the appointed feasts of the Lord. As he "sat in church" offering the appointed sacrifice, did Elkanah realise that he was asking God to bless a relationship that God had not sanctioned? There had been human fulfilment in the second marriage because Peninah had children and Hannah the first wife had not. Without doubt Elkanah loved Hannah and made this plain by giving her double portions, being aware that her childless state was a sore burden for her. But if husband and wife loved each other and were devout towards God, why did their marriage go wrong and lead to the introduction of another woman? Had they not kept each other close to God as they should have done? Had there been a spiritual breakdown because there had been no children? Had Elkanah sought the human comfort in Peninah that he did not get from Hannah? Had the man's desires taken precedence over his duties? We are not told the answers to our questions but we do well to check up that in our human relationships we do function as "helpmeets", enablers and encouragers in the things of God.

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1:3-8

Considering the atmosphere of spiritual backsliding in the nation, no-one viewing the situation would have thought that someone so "unsuccessful" as Hannah could possibly be spiritually significant. Peninah, with all her children, seems to have been an attractive woman and perhaps it was her human qualities that drew Elkanah's attention in the first place. But it is clear from v.6 that Peninah had a mean and bitter spirit that delighted to hurt her competitor, who still had her husband's love. This woman was certainly not of the same spiritual calibre as Hannah. There is a lesson here in relationships. What do we look for in a partner? Is it merely human attractiveness or do we seek someone who will be a spiritual help? It is a fact of experience that for some Christian's marriage, with its human fulfilment, spells the end of true spiritual usefulness. But why had the first marriage failed? Hannah was bitter because of her childlessness and Elkanah was neither willing to wait nor to accept God's ways with them. Did Elkanah know the story of Abraham's impatience and the long entail of complication it brought (Gen. 16:1-6, 15-17:1)? Did Hannah play the same part as Sarah? Did Elkanah, simply because of impatience and longing for human fulfilment, take the situation into his own hand rather than wait on God? We cannot tell, but we must learn that it is God's will alone that leads to life and peace and hope. We are the ones who create complications, not God. But, of course, there is a Devil who finds the area of human relationships a profitable one for taking people away from God and limiting their spiritual usefulness. Note how long this unhappy and painful situation went on and how even Elkanah's declarations of love could not comfort Hannah. Do not forget that Elkanah himself had to live with the awareness of how his spiritual disobedience had brought so much hurt to those whom he loved, and to himself. Do right by God. That is the way of safety and blessing.

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1:9-11

So far the detail of the story has been intensely human but we must not forget that God is in it and that God was preparing an ordinary, unambitious woman to play a significant part in the spiritual revival of the nation. But why had Hannah to suffer so sorely and for so long? It was the tormenting of the adversary that drove Hannah to the Throne of Grace to plead her cause with God. She became a woman of spiritual calibre by way of disappointment, loneliness and hurt, so much of which she just did not understand. Can you imagine her saying at times, "Lord, why must it be like this?" God did not explain. Think of Jesus' words in John 13:7; Job's words in Job 23:1-3, 8-10; and the words spoken about Jesus, who was the Suffering Servant, in Heb. 5:7-10. The great practical apostle James counsels us not to resent the trials and tribulations that come to us but to recognise them as God's instruments to make us ready for the service planned for us (Jas. 1:2-4). Out of her sore affliction Hannah prayed

and her human longings were all mixed up with her spiritual commitment. She had no idea just how far-reaching the answer to her prayer would be. Nor did she know how costly it would be to give up her son to God and to send him into such a ghastly and costly mission field as decadent Israel. She had no idea that, in the very moment of her costly and earnest vow to God, she would be misunderstood and criticised by the very representative of God in the Temple. We must not make Hannah perfect, for part of the lesson here is how God chooses and uses people who are far from perfect. But neither must we criticise her too much. Yes, she may have left the family meal (9a) feeling envious of the obvious family happiness; feeling hurt and left out of things, feeling bitter at how life had worked out; but her pain made her go to God in a new way. Whatever her reasons for wanting a son she knew that only God could grant her request. It had taken her a long and painful time to come to faith like this. It was a costly victory.

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1:12-18

Note well how Hannah covenanted her child to the Lord before he was ever conceived. No doubt as soon as she knew she was pregnant her vow would have been renewed, recognising that the child belonged to God before he belonged to her. This is when parents should begin to pray for their children, praying in faith not fear, and not leaving the spiritual training of their children until after the world has claimed them. All parents, together with aunts, uncles and friends, need to be very careful before they lead and encourage little children into all manner of worldly hobbies and pursuits, because young hearts can be captured and captivated so powerfully by the world that Christ is shut out, or at best has to struggle to be fitted in. Hannah may well have been aware of the evil atmosphere of the nation and that, mingled with her own heart hunger for a son, and mingled further with the sovereign purposes of God for her life, produced an intense spiritual earnestness as she prayed. She was scarcely aware of the presence of Eli until his criticism broke in on her. She must have been sorely hurt to be so misunderstood by the very man who was supposed to be aware of and to minister in spiritual things. Think of what grace would have been ministered to her heart if the priest had spoken words of comfort and encouragement. First her beloved husband had shown he did not understand her pain and now God's representative failed to recognise it, putting the worst possible construction on her spiritual earnestness. But God saw, knew, understood and cared. He always does. He remembers our humanity (Ps.103:13-14) and He does not crush (Isa. 42:1-3). But His ways are mysterious. Just think: if Peninah had been kinder Hannah might well have come to terms with her less than happy situation. Through pain, God was leading her into a life richer and deeper than she ever imagined.

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1:12-18

There is a solemn lesson to be learned from these verses by all who are involved in any way with the work of God, especially those called to lead and to minister in holy things. We have a picture here of a man of God who had lost his spiritual awareness of things in the House of God and had lost his influence in his own home (2:22-25). No doubt the priest was orthodox in doctrine and long-standing in reputation, but he did not recognise spiritual prayer when it was there before his eyes. Many a minister, old or young in years, has reacted in the same way when earnest believers have wanted to make God's House a place of prayer. And many a Christian has pressurised ministers (old and young) to have all manner of activities in church even though they themselves have been significantly absent from and even contemptuous of the church prayer meeting. It is serious indeed when God is stirring Himself to work a new work of revival and His own people are unaware of His presence, activity and intentions. Think well. Are we alive to what God is doing in our own congregational situations and are we ready and willing to be part of it? Hannah answered the priest with quiet grace and dignity and this may well have impressed the old man. It may have rung a faint bell in the dim recesses of his soul, reminding him of days when he too had been deeply earnest about the things of God. But he knew that it was not so with him now. Was there anyone with enough gentle but firm grace to speak to the old man to say to him that he was not what he once was? Do we have friends who will be honest with us like that? Have we the courage to ask trusted friends or ministers to

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tell us honestly how they see us? Eli spoke a kindly benediction to Hannah, but he may have been relieved when she went away. Backsliders tend not to like spiritual conversation.

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1:19-28

Hannah had a new peace in her heart because all her burden had been given to the Lord. We do not know if she had assurance that her prayer was to be answered, but instead of her mind and heart being fixed on the denials of life they were now fixed on God and that brought joy and hope as well as peace and it showed on her face (18). The family home must have been aware of her new serenity and Elkanah no doubt knew a fresh awareness of love in Hannah's heart. It is doubtful if any of them, even Hannah, realised just how significant their lives were, not even when the child was conceived. Perhaps, like Mary the mother of our Lord, Hannah pondered all these things in her heart (Luke 2:51). Note carefully that as Hannah's sore life had brought her to God in a new way, her fulfilment now did not take her away from God. Her child was an answer to prayer and she remembered her vow. The child belonged to the Lord. It seems clear that Hannah had confided in her husband and he responded in faith (23). It is not clear why Hannah stopped going to the feasts with her husband, (Exodus 23:14-17 states three required feasts each year but it seems Elkanah went only once a year), nor why Hannah and her husband did not conform to the ritual required after a first child was born (Lev. 12:1-8; Lk. 2:21-24). Perhaps due to the low spiritual state of the whole nation these observances were given only a token or formal observance similar to our own sad day when some "church members" put in a token attendance at Communion once a year. But there was genuine faith and consecration in Hannah and her husband. This is evident in the words of her testimony and in the actual dedication and handing over of her young son to the Lord. The boy would have been about three years of age and it needs little imagination to think of the costly wrench in parting with this only child. Consecration is costly, but not without its reward (Phil. 3:7-11; 1 Sam. 2:21; Matt. 19:27-30).

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2:1-10

It almost seems an intrusion into something personal and holy to examine a prayer that comes from a heart that is both sore and sweet in its yieldedness to God, but there is much to learn. Hannah sees now that God had been in her situation all along the line, even though she and others had been unaware of His presence and His working. The situation in the nation, morally and spiritually, was not promising and things had reached a very low level. It was not the kind of situation in which an authentic spiritual revival was to be expected, but God can be very unexpected! Who would ever have thought that Saul of Tarsus would become the world's most significant evangelist and theologian (Acts 9:1-9)? Right through Chapter 1, and indeed long before that, God was quietly at work preparing for the future. In unfavourable circumstances an ordinary, insignificant couple had a baby who was to be the key to the future but, of course, years had to pass before the child grew to manhood. God takes time. We are the ones who are always in a rush. For example Moses' preservation as a babe was miraculous, but two-thirds of his life were to pass before the significant event of the Burning Bush (Acts 7: 23,30). Thirty years passed after the birth at Bethlehem before Jesus began His public ministry (Lk. 3:23). King Josiah and the prophet Jeremiah were born about the same year and Josiah was twenty-six before he was God's instrument in restoring the Word of God to the nation (2 Kings 22:1-8ff; Jer. 1:1-5ff). Whether we think of a building site or an area of agriculture there is a work of clearing rubble and sinking foundations or ploughing before the obvious work begins. The trouble is that we are often unwilling to clear out the clutter from our lives and equally unwilling to undergo the discipline of preparation. God has two options. Either He can leave us in our narrow limited usefulness or deal with us to open up our lives to His blessing and service. What are we willing for?

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2:1-10

This prayer is the joyful worship and thanksgiving of a life drawn into God's good and perfect will, a life that has a positive future. Later in the chapter we read of Eli and his sons being written off in terms of useful service. As we begin to study the prayer, pause to ponder just how far down God may have to bring the nation and the church in our own day before Christians begin to deal with God as Hannah did. This prayer is a veritable fountain of praise and it is inspired by answered prayer (1;26-28). It is all about the God who does things for His people. He turns the

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tables on his enemies (was Hannah having a "dig" at Peninah in v.1?). He transforms situations in a moment, or so it seems. He removes what is in His way, judges hypocrisy and sets in motion His sure and sovereign plans of salvation. Hannah is saying "What a wonderful God!" not "What a wonderful child I have been given!" although that was far truer than she realised. The whole of v.2-10 *may* have been a Psalm or Hymn in common use in Israel but its truth had not really registered with Hannah until then. Have we not had the same kind of experience when the truth of a familiar hymn has suddenly flamed with light? Someone in a student conference said of Wesley's words, "He breaks the power of cancelled sin" that he had sung the hymn more often than he could count but the truth of them had never dawned until that moment. In Hannah's case it was the pressure of circumstances that compelled her to take God seriously. But we do not always learn from God's disciplines (Heb. 12:11). There were others in Hannah's generation who were in the same situation, under the same disciplines, hearing the same Word of God and sensing the same stirring of God's power, but they did not profit. You can sit under a true ministry for years and yet never benefit (Heb. 2:1-4; 4:1-2; 1 Cor. 10:1-12).

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2:1-10

Note carefully what Hannah had learned about God. There is none like Him in holiness and rock-like dependability and we do well to humble ourselves under His mighty hand. There is none like Him in knowledge, for nothing is hidden from Him, and by Him all our actions are weighed and evaluated (2-3). He is the God to whom power belongs, who scatters the proud, strengthens the weak, feeds the hungry and sends away empty those who think themselves rich (4-5). God is the One who presides at births and deaths; who raises and brings down individuals and kingdoms; setting the span of their time and the limits of their operations (6-8). It is God who keeps the feet of His people, watching over their going out and coming in, standing guard over them, taking His place between His people and their enemies. There is realism in this prayer. It recognises the fact that there are enemies who will always stand and act against God and His people. If we forget this, we will often be taken unawares and knocked off balance. We must never be surprised by the fiery trials which beset us (1 Pet. 4:12ff). They are to be expected. But we must never fear evil, because the whole kingdom of evil has been overcome and its power broken (Col. 2:15). It is when we grasp the spiritual facts of life that we begin to be able to handle all the different practical problems that confront us. Why is it that we are so slow to learn that the first response to every situation should be to "Take it to the Lord in prayer". We have given only two references in this reading and have quite deliberately left the others to be found by using a concordance. If that seems too taxing, read Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1:46-55.

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2:11-21

We have a dramatic portrayal of the on-going situation in v.11. On the face of it, it was all very ordinary. Elkanah's family life went on. The religious life of the shrine at Shiloh went on, and we will read more about this. But a child had been born and that changed the whole future course of events, as did the birth of the Child at Bethlehem. We cannot tell exactly the age of the boy Samuel in v.11 but the emphasis on his youth is repeated in v.18,21,26, and 3:1. The story takes time to develop and possibly no-one at this stage had any idea at all that God had begun to do a new thing in the nation (Isa. 43:18-21). We must not fail to see that God's key figure for the future blessing of His work and people was set in what would certainly appear to be an undesirable and even dangerous situation. None of us would like to have a child fostered by a decrepit old priest like Eli, especially with his two decadent sons in the house. None of us would choose to send a child to a school whose headmaster was a man like Eli. But Shiloh was God's place, Eli God's duly appointed priest, and the Temple with its hallowed associations was where Samuel needed to be to grow up in the atmosphere of religious worship, even if that that worship left a lot to be desired. Of course, the whole situation was watched over by God Himself and undergirded by the unflinching prayers of a godly mother and the powerful influence of a life so gladly given to God. This is what we must learn to do for our children as they grow up. Give them to the Lord right from the start, instructing them in the things of God, but not

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pressurising them spiritually in terms of "making a decision", surrounding them with our prayers and showing them by the consistent pattern of our lives that the way of the Lord is the way of life and blessing. If you think the young Samuel was vulnerable in such a situation, remember how Joseph was kept safe in prison in Egypt and Moses preserved and trained in the court of Pharaoh so that both men were ready for God when the time came. God's ways may perplex us but they are safe.

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2:11-21

We have emphasised God's sure preparation of Samuel as the years passed but we must also note how evil flourished in a brash and arrogant way during these same years. Eli, the old minister, had allowed things to slip and the life of the congregation just trundled on in its irrelevant way. Any hungry seeking souls who came to a service would find only empty, orthodox words but nothing to feed, guide or encourage them. Hannah had discovered that! (1:12-14) Eli's sons, who were his assistants, were worthless men with a contempt for holy things and for their father's former spiritual convictions and commitment (12). These were profane men whom Jesus would describe as whited sepulchres, full of disease, spreading corruption (Matt. 23:27). They not only brought the House of God into disrepute (think of the scandals of some ministers' lives reported in the daily press), they also dragged the people of God down to their level of shameless dealings with holy things. We do not go into the details of the corruption of the holy sacrifices but simply point out that these men were making use of God's house and service to minister to their own greedy and lustful desires. Their whole attitude was "Us first; God can have the inferior goods that are left over." We may well feel indignant and repulsed by such blatant behaviour but do we not tend to do the same kind of thing in the allocating of our time and energies, all of which rightly belong to the Lord? Think of the "excuses" offered by many Christians for their absence from mid-week and Prayer Meetings, and even from Evening Services. We say we need time for ourselves and money for our various needs and "extras", but what of the needs and claims of God's House and work? We would not like to be openly charged with contempt for holy things, but did not Jesus say that we were to seek first the Kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33)? Who comes first: ourselves, our friends and families, our hobbies, our chosen preferences in Christian activity, or our rightful duty to God's House?

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2:11-21

The last section of this passage (18 -21) gives a gleam of light in the darkness of the sad situation. It would be easy to be sentimental by concentrating on the "little robe", but that would miss the point. There is no mention of Peninah, the second wife. Either she now had a "secondary" position in the family, or her attitude had changed, or Hannah no longer felt threatened by her. The clear reference to Elkanah and Hannah in their regular pilgrimages suggests that husband and wife were now walking with God in a new way, in truer fellowship and obedience. They did not pine over the absence their son who had been given to the Lord, nor did they regret the vow that had been made regarding him. Seeing him growing up in the service of the Lord, their prayers would be ever more earnest, especially as they would be aware of the spiritual dangers facing him. As the parents stood before Eli to receive the traditional and appointed blessing in the words of Num. 6:22-27, it may be that the adults had begun to be aware that God really was in their situation and that the future was beginning to gleam with light. Perhaps the lesson we have to learn here is that we tend to be too much anchored in the past, especially with regard to our failures, but sometimes with our successes, so that we fail to look forward to the things that God has prepared both in this world and the next for those who love Him. Later in the chapter (30) we have God's statement that He will honour those who honour Him, and, as Hannah's experience shows (21), this includes human as well as spiritual blessing. In 1 Cor. 2:9, quoting from Isa. 64:4, Paul speaks of the God who prepares good for His people even though there may be a long waiting time. This calls for the kind of commitment spoken of in Rom. 12: 1-2, remembering that in the waiting time, there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:35-39).

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2:22-25

These are solemn verses highlighted by being set between v.21b and 26. In the presence of the Lord, Samuel grew and it became ever more clear that God was with the young lad as he grew into manhood. It was in the presence of the all-seeing God that Eli grew old and it was ever more clear that God was no longer with him nor his evil sons. The behaviour of the sons had reached a pitch of blatant and public immorality which was the subject of common gossip. Even backslidden society was shocked by such behaviour on the part of those who were supposed to be servants of a holy God. We have the same kind of shocking situation in the church at Corinth, among believers who were proud of their spirituality (1 Cor. 5: 1-2). This is a terrible contradiction of the calling of God's people to be holy as God is holy (1 Pet. 1:15-16), to shine as lights in a crooked generation (Phil. 2:14-16) and to live lives that are worthy of the Gospel (Eph. 4:1). The old man seems to have been alarmed and distressed by the news of his sons' doings and yet, although his words seem appropriate, he seems to have been resigned to the hopelessness of the situation. When we let things slide, just hoping they will somehow right themselves, we eventually lose both the desire and the capacity to take action. The old man never meant things to slide as far as this and he recognised that it is possible to go so far in sinning against God that there is no longer any possibility of restoration, although there may be last minute repentance and forgiveness, as there was for one of the thieves crucified along with Jesus. Yes, Eli was weak, and had been for a long time, but who are we to criticise? Do we not hold back from checking and warning friends and family regarding their spiritual and moral lives? Eli's sons were grown men. He could not make them change, and he may well have felt the guilt of his own long years of backsliding. If he had been a better father and a truer minister of God his sons might have turned out better men.

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2:27-36

We must recall the solemn words at the end of v.25 which indicate that the time of judgment had come for Eli's sons, whether they were aware of it or not. It is not the fact of judgment that amazes us but rather the fact of God's long-suffering (2 Pet. 3:9). God waits for two reasons: first that men may yet come to repentance, and also that it may become patently obvious that evil is so radically and determinedly evil that nothing but judgment would be right. What we are told now is that Eli the father was also to be involved in God's judgment and he was told that his household after him would have no share in the blessing that God was going to bring to the nation. It must be a terrible experience to be aware that you are being left out of what God is doing in a new stage of His work (31-32). It must be terrible also to become aware that you could have been actively involved in the work of God but have been laid aside as of no further use because of spiritual unfaithfulness. Paul speaks of this in 1 Cor. 9:24-27. It is not a matter of losing our salvation, because once in Christ nothing can take us from His hand. But we can lose the privilege of service and we can lose the reward of service (1 Cor. 3:10-15). This was happening to a man of God (Eli), and to his sons and their children after them. Such a solemn message, so direct and uncompromising, was given to a man of God to deliver to Eli. Note that even in such a godless generation and such a backslidden church God had not left Himself without a witness (Acts 14:17). It could not have been easy for this unknown prophet to speak the message God had charged him with. It was not the kind of sermon a congregation would be pleased with. But are ministers called to please their congregations? Are they not rather charged to hold back nothing and to preach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:17-21,25-27)?

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2:27-36

We must note the historical sweep of the prophet's sermon and the particular reference to the great privilege and blessing accorded to the priestly house of Aaron. It must have been a tremendous thing in Israel to see successive generations of a family in the priesthood, in the ministry, or in the eldership as we would say, handling the things of God and shepherding the people of God. But this calls for watchfulness as well as faithfulness, because the sons of godly men are not always godly, and should not automatically be entrusted with holy things. Samuel in due time made that mistake (8:1-3). In the New Testament both Paul and Peter warned of the danger (Acts 20:28-30; 1 Tim.

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4:16; 1 Pet. 5:1-3). The man of God spoke very plainly and announced the withdrawal of privilege and service because they had used their privileged position to make a name for themselves instead of a name for God. At the end of our time of service it may be pleasant to be praised and honoured by men but it is God's "well done" that really matters (Matt. 25:21; 2 Tim. 4:6-8). It is made plain that the house of Eli was being rejected because of unfaithfulness (30) and it must have pierced the old man (but possibly not his sons) to hear God declaring that He would raise up a faithful man who could be trusted (35). In days to come Eli's house would be left with only regrets about what might have been, and they would cast envious eyes on those who knew and rejoiced in God's blessing. No doubt there would be bitterness, and none can be so cruel as those who once knew God's blessing on their lives and service but who now have lost their love for the Lord. A famous and popular evangelical preacher said to a young minister who had occupied his pulpit: "I used to be able to preach like that, but not any more." How sad! May God keep us true. Read God's rebuke of the unfaithful shepherds in Ezek. 34:1-10.

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3:1

We take this one verse to emphasise the ordinariness of the situation in Israel. The years were passing and Samuel was now possibly ten or twelve years of age. It seemed nothing much was happening of any spiritual significance. Perhaps a small remnant of faith existed within the broken-down nation and church, and perhaps they were getting disheartened in their prayers, wondering why God was not giving any answer. But their prayers had been answered. God's key instrument for the future was chosen and in place, but he had to be allowed to grow to manhood. Think forward to the Christmas story. After the localised excitement of the birth of the Child, thirty years passed before His public ministry began. But it would be very wrong to say that during those years God was doing nothing! Granted things in the nation, morally and spiritually, were getting worse and worse. But we must not assess God's work only on the basis of what is seen. Think back to the years Hannah was married and childless before she turned to God in her heart-hungry prayer. Think of the years from the birth of Samuel to this point in the story. The "slow watches of the night" are every bit as much a significant part of God's advancing kingdom as those spells which are full of excitement. In Jewish culture Samuel would be regarded now as being on the verge of manhood and we must not sentimentalise the story, as the old Victorian painter did, portraying a little boy in his nightshirt kneeling in prayer at his bedside. This young lad was going about his religious duties, as he had been brought up to do. It was routine religion in the Temple, but it was a time when there was little awareness of God and scarcely any hearing of the Word of God. The evil life-stream of the nation flowed on and the "church" had neither the knowledge nor the spiritual power to do anything about it. It was a situation very similar to what we face in our own day. There is much for us to learn.

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3:2-9

The generation in which we live is petulant and, having become accustomed to "instant" coffee and meals that can be microwaved in a few minutes, there is little in the way of patience. Even Christians want immediate results and there is little understanding of the need to prepare the way of the Lord (Isa. 40:3-5). If some mention Elijah, who burst in on the nation without warning, they need to be reminded that Elijah had spent a long time walking with the Lord (1 Kings 17:1) before his ministry began. Moses also was prepared over a long time and two-thirds of his life were past before his call at the burning bush (Acts 7:22-30). Paul had long years out of the public eye before his significant ministry began (Gal. 1:15-2:1). God is not slow, but He prepares both the situation and His servants, and we need to make sure we are learning, changing and growing up spiritually, so that in due time we will be ready for God to bring His gracious purposes to pass in, for and through us. Rash activity can precipitate a crisis that is not of God. Think of Moses' challenge of obvious injustice in Exodus 2:11-15 and remember that it led to a long delay in the developing of his story. What we have to learn is that God watches over situations as well as people, and that God uses the most unexpected people to further His work. It is quite astonishing that God entrusted the early training of Samuel to an old priest who was spiritually degenerate. Compare this with Moses

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who was safe and well trained in Pharaoh's court (Acts 7:20-22). It is clear from our passage that Samuel had grown fond of the old man and seems to have learned from him a real reverence for holy things. There may be a suggestion that the lamp which was not allowed to go out and was rekindled every morning was a symbol of the unbroken continuance of the work of God. There was a lot Samuel did not yet know but he was well prepared.

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3:2-9

Thrill to this story. Here is a young lad on the threshold of adulthood. He had grown up with an awareness of God and of the things of God. He slept near the Ark, the symbol of the presence, the covenant, the law and the mercy of God. He must have learned about the holiness of God and the sacrifice of atonement and, though not yet understanding, he would have an in-built sense of awe. That is one of the benefits for children being brought up in church, even if the minister and the ministry leave a lot to be desired. Of course, lifeless religion can make young people react against all that belongs to the House of God, but here it did not have that effect on Samuel. Again and again we must marvel at God's providence. We are told that at this significant moment in his life Samuel did not yet know the Lord (7) and when God spoke to him it was in such a human voice that Samuel did not know it was God. It was the old priest, whose "evangelical" credentials were very suspect, who recognised that God was in this situation. We are allowed to imagine the warming and stirring of his heart as he became aware that, after years of barren ministry, he was being allowed the privilege of pointing God's "man of the future" in the right direction. Do not forget Samuel's situation. There is no indication he had the company of others of his own age. He would have been aware to some degree of the profane speech and behaviour of Eli's sons and of the general godlessness of much that went on in and around the House of God. And yet, at the very age when churches nowadays lose young people unless all sorts of "attractions" are provided, this young man was ready for God. Whatever age we may be as we read these notes, are we listening for God's voice and are we ready for God?

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3:10-14

In a way quite sovereign and yet in a way that was gentle and kind, God prepared Samuel to hear and recognise His voice. The story is of a young man in conversation with God, being taken into God's confidence, and being told the most solemn things that indicated the end of an era. The spiritual service of Eli and his family was at an end because of unfaithfulness, and it may have been that Samuel began to be aware that he was to be the replacement man to do God's will. On the other hand Samuel may have been perplexed as to why God was speaking to him in this way. It was certainly a very solemn message to entrust to a young, untried man who as yet knew little about God and had had few conscious, personal dealings with God. But Samuel did learn in this encounter with God that God is the One who sees and knows all that is going on, because nothing is hidden from Him (Heb. 4:13). Samuel also learned that after many years a man in the holy service of God can be dismissed without hope of restoration, not just because of what he had become but because of what he had failed to do (13). Eli had allowed family affections and loyalties to take precedence over his loyalty to God and to God's work. That is always a temptation. We make concessions to and excuses for those we like but tend to be hard on those for whom we have no particular regard. Eli must have been aware then of the seriousness of letting things slide to the point when it was too late to try to retrieve the situation. But note carefully that God was enunciating to Samuel profound spiritual principles regarding obedience and fruitfulness. And this was right at the start of his manhood and at the initial stage of his spiritual service. Perhaps in youth work in evangelical circles we have been too concerned to *give* interesting things to young Christians and have forgotten to instruct them in the demands of obedience.

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3:15-18

It could be inferred from v.15 that Samuel lay and thought for the rest of the night but did not sleep. Then in spite of having had a personal encounter with God in the night, he went about his normal duties, and that is always a

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good sign. Samuel's experience of God did not go to his head nor did it make him boast or speak unadvisedly, as was the case with Joseph, another young man marked out for God's service (Gen. 37:5-11). Joseph's spiritual pride led to an unnecessary annoying of his brothers to their loss, and to years of misfortune for Joseph until he was ready to be trusted with significant service. Samuel must have known that Eli would want to know about this remarkable visitation from God and the young man was faced with the challenge of being willing to deliver a solemn message that would be sore to hear. He knew, or he assumed, that the old priest would be deeply hurt by this clear message of rejection by God and it is understandable that Samuel waited until Eli spoke first. It is neither cowardice nor unspiritual to wait for the right time to speak, especially if the message is one of rebuke (Eccles.3:7). Apart from anything else, both the burden of the message and the costly concern for those who will hear it (more important than the costliness of delivering the message) work together to make the heart tender. That always leads to wise words being used and a gracious though solemn attitude and spirit being shown. Many a young man has begun his ministry by preaching messages of judgment, and judgment is part of the Gospel. But if we find it easy to preach judgment we have parted company with Jesus who wept over Jerusalem (Lk. 19:41-43). As the years of ministry go past the significance of the issue bears in on hearts that are tender towards God, and the preaching of judgment is ever more costly. The sad thing in our passage is that Eli seemed to be strangely unmoved. It seems there was neither regret nor repentance. How very sad!

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3:19-4:1a

A new day had dawned and the nation knew it. But we must not forget the passing of the years. Calculations are difficult but we could reckon on Hannah being married ten years at least before Samuel was born. (1:8); twelve years pass before the call of Samuel; then we are told Samuel grew (3:19), and if he was twenty when his preaching ministry began then we have to think of some thirty years having passed since the story began. We thrill to the thought of this man's mighty ministry but we must remember the atmosphere of the nation, the godlessness, the ignorance of God, the moral degeneration and the inevitable reaction of the population against the kind of religion they had witnessed and been tyrannised by for many, many years. It would need a big man, persuaded of his call and of the authenticity of his message, to be a prophet of God in such a situation. We will see more of this as we go on, but at the moment, pause and look back over the story. If Hannah and Elkanah were still alive what were their thoughts about God's dealings with them as they saw their son becoming the spiritual leader of God's people? Of course, Hannah had prayed from the beginning and she would not stop praying now. Every preacher *needs* people who will pray, and some who read these notes who feel they have no gifts for public service should take on themselves the ministry of intercessory prayer for those who are called to preach. This is partnership in the Gospel. Think also for a moment of God's ways. Hannah had years of childlessness, and then a child of promise. For many years Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Zechariah and Elizabeth had no children. They all had to wait. In the end the children who were born were miracle children, and none more so than the child of Bethlehem. (Genesis 16:1; 25:21; 29:31; Luke 1:7; 2:34)

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3:19-4:1a

The most significant thing about Samuel and the explanation of his fruitful ministry and his life-long influence was simply that God was with him. He was born for this, destined to it before he was ever conceived. God's hand was on him from the start, and in due time he was called to this ministry (cf. Jer. 1:5; Amos 7:14-15). Having prepared and called him, God was with him, and whenever he spoke the people knew that God was speaking to them. Samuel's ministry was effective because he was a clean channel, a committed man, through whom God's Word could flow to the people and do its own appointed work (Isa. 55:9-11). Of course Samuel was not perfect but, even then, there was the over-ruling of God so that by the activity of the Holy Spirit (never think the Spirit is only known and active in the New Testament) the Word of God was not bound or restricted (2 Tim. 2:9). It is stated clearly here that Samuel's ministry was one of declaring God's Word and such was his ministry that everyone knew

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that God was with him. But this ministry also began to create in the nation the kind of atmosphere in which the Word of God could more easily be preached so that the ministry of Samuel spread to the whole of Israel. What we shall see in due time is that Samuel did not do all the preaching all the time. Others entered into his labours under his influence and he instituted the schools of the prophets that were to become so significant in the times of the Kings of Israel (1 Sam. 10:5,10-13; 19:20). All this long-term work was being set in motion in these stories we are studying. Remember how, humanly speaking, it can be traced back to a woman's prayers and dedication to God.

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4:1b-4

Look back to 3:21 where there is reference to the fact that during Samuel's ministry the Lord appeared again in Shiloh. God came again among His people, renewed fellowship with His people, and His presence was their life, joy and peace. Such blessing would, of course, make the people aware of just how much they had been bereft of God's beneficial presence in past years. It is only when we are restored to fellowship that we become aware of just how far we had backslidden. There is no mention of Samuel in this chapter and the story seems to follow on from 3:18 (3:19-4:1a being the historian's brief summary of Samuel's ministry). The Philistines, constant enemies, had invaded Israel's territory. Israel went out to battle and was defeated decisively. Their reaction was typical and they asked why God had dealt with them in that way. They had taken for granted that since they were God's chosen people then God would vindicate them. They did not examine themselves to see if their lives were pleasing to God or not, but decided that their defeat was explained by the fact that they did not have with them in the battle the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of God's presence and God's salvation. Reference is made to the fact that the two degenerate, blasphemous sons of Eli were in charge of the Ark, but this did not seem to have any significance to the men of Israel. They were regarding the Ark as something of a "lucky charm", just as the pagans regarded their gods as "guarantees" of success. Israel forgot that the Ark contained the tables of God's law which expressed His holiness and His standard for His people's lives. They forgot that God cannot and will not dwell with sin. They had no thought of repentance or change of life. They sent for the Ark. This was to be the answer to spiritual defeat, just as some people think a "special night of prayer" will bring revival. But God is not on the end of a string to be made use of by a people who have in practice ignored Him.

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4:5-11

There was a tidal wave of excitement, emotion and religious fervour when the Ark came to the camp, carried by two religious rogues. Such was the shout that the Philistines were afraid, thinking that Israel had indeed a mighty god amongst them. They knew the stories of how God had redeemed and delivered His people and how so often God had smitten Israel's enemies in the past. What they did not know was that God was not with His people as He had been in the past. For some reason the Philistines plucked up courage to fight again. They fought and they won and, in capturing the Ark, they thought they had overcome Israel's God. Israel was scattered and shamed and the devastation was great. In the course of it all Eli's sons met their final judgment and the removal of these two men lifted a blight from the religious life of the people. Some of the enemies of God and the Gospel get converted; some get removed by God! That is why people must be careful about attitudes and actions lest they end up fighting against God (Acts 5:33-39). If Samuel was in any degree known in Israel at this time he certainly was not consulted about this situation. The people should have been asking if God was with them or not. They had simply assumed that He was and went out to battle. But many still do this. They launch activities, they commit themselves short-term and long-term without first asking if God is with them in their plans. It is not enough to say that God has been with us in the past. That is what Samson said, forgetting that his sinful indulgence and his spiritual pride had grieved the Lord away (Judges 16:20).

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4:12-18

This is a sad story. Note how the old man sits trembling, his concern being not for his sons but for the Ark of God. He still had some sense of spiritual values and, grim though the nation's situation had been for a long time, he knew it would be far worse if even the symbol of God's presence was lost. When he heard news that his worst fears had been fulfilled his shock was so great he fell over and died. The awful thing for him was that the news he had received signified that God had forgotten His people and had abandoned them to their enemies. Of course the Christian message is just the opposite. It tells us that God has remembered and that He has come to us to save and to deliver. This is something to remember at Christmas time. Suppose all our frantic preparations were frustrated, all our decorations and celebrations taken away and all the pretty lights extinguished, would we still have a Christmas? Of course we would! The message is so clear. God has remembered us. In this chapter the significant sign of God's presence was gone and the people felt God had gone. In our own day, what if all church buildings disappeared and all congregations reduced to mere handfuls meeting in secret, would we still have hope in God? Of course we would. God does not change, His promises still stand, and He remains faithful even when his people are unfaithful (2 Tim.2:13). Think well. Are we more dependent on the signs of God's presence than on God Himself and His sure Word?

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4:19-22

The passage tells of a child about to be born. But the name of that child had no glad greetings to bring, for Ichabod means that the glory of God had departed from the nation and the people, leaving them to live with their sins and the dread consequences of the God-ignoring lives they had led. Almost at once it reminds us of another child, whose name had a better and more glorious message. He is Immanuel, God with us. What a thought. In spite of all our sinning God has come to us, right down to the situation and circumstances of all our sin and need. This child's name is Jesus, a God-given name, and He is the one who shall save His people from their sins. He is God manifest in flesh. He came into our sorry situation to lift us up, and lead us forward into the future. That is exactly what Samuel was born for and prepared for. But to understand the greatness of his ministry and influence we need to grasp the spiritual grimness of the situation he faced, a grimness suggested by the words of the dying mother. Whether the people generally were aware of it or not, the glory of God, that is His presence to bless, guard and guide them had departed from the nation. Whether or not they understood the solemnity of that fact it is difficult to say. It may well have been as it is in our day when church people are not too worried about the many signs of spiritual barrenness although they may be aware of and even worried about the practical issues of falling numbers and finance. It is so easy to live without being aware of the absence of God. But is God ever really absent?

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5:1-12

There is grim irony in this story. Israel had been so sure that with God amongst them, symbolised by the Ark, they were bound to win their battles. But no symbol, be it cross or crucifix, rosary beads or communion table, has any real spiritual significance without faith and obedience, and there was neither in Israel. They were confounded and the Ark was captured. The Philistines, being superstitious idolaters, assumed that having captured the Ark of Israel they had conquered and captured Israel's God. They thought they could now enlist Him, along with Dagon their god, to work for them. But they began to learn what God was like. Although God had used the Philistines to chastise Israel and to awaken the people to their spiritual need, He would have no truck with these godless men who had laid hands on the holy Ark. When there is no faith people underestimate God and are surprised by His interventions and His methods. The Philistines discovered that fighting against God is never profitable because His face is against those who do evil (1 Pet. 3:12). What this story makes plain is that God is His own witness when His people fail, and the Ark which had done nothing to help Israel (because their sins had grieved God away from them) was a mighty instrument of judgment on the Philistines. It must have been a shock to them to find Dagon

their god that they thought had given them victory lying on the floor shattered and humiliated. In no time everyone wanted to get rid of this God of Israel who could work so mightily even when His people had failed. No-one wanted Israel's God because, after all, He is a God with whom people have to deal whether they want to or not. There was no sign of any of the Philistines being awakened to seek after Israel's God even though they had seen His power. This is the darkness of unbelief and it is seen starkly in the story in Mark 5:1-17 where people who had seen the power of Jesus to transform life pleaded with Him to go away. Be sobered by the fact that He went away.

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5:1-12

It is important to see that the wicked Philistines simply could not get rid of God. No place was willing to have Him. He was "too hot to handle". Perhaps the Psalmist was remembering this story when he spoke about God laughing at the antics of evil men and nations (Ps. 2:4). No human intervention was needed to humiliate Dagon, and every time his supporters propped him up he was simply knocked down again. Some people have a great deal of trouble with their gods, who are always letting them down. The Philistines thought Israel's God was finished, but He kept confounding them and their god. It is the same with so many who are forever pronouncing that God is finished; God is dead; belief in God is a hangover from man's undeveloped past; that man is the master of his own destiny. But God knocks all these idols to the ground and demonstrates in the brokenness of society that the "answers" of the humanists, politicians, agnostics and atheists are powerless to save or to keep or to change the human situation. But, just like the Philistines, people will not learn. Even though they have experience of God judging human society for its wrongs and evils, they still have only one desire, namely to get rid of God (5:10-11). Did not Jesus tell a story of people who said, "We will not have this man to reign over us," (Luke 19:14)? Think of our story this way: people have escaped from the grim realities of the world by worship at the idolatrous shrine of commercialised Christmas. Two days after Christmas the Child of Bethlehem is virtually forgotten and "Dagon" is back on his pedestal for the worship routine of the New Year Sales. The money is spent, but the price has yet to be paid.

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6:1-9

The Philistines' victory had turned to defeat and their misery under the hand of God's rebuke lasted seven months. They were aware of a hand against them at every turn. Nothing was working out for them, and finally they began to look for a spiritual explanation, that is, an explanation that took into account the fact of Israel's God. Note carefully that these people were not totally ignorant of spiritual things because they knew of God's dealings with Israel and Egypt at the time of the Exodus (6). No doubt they knew many of the other stories of how God had saved and blessed His redeemed and chosen people down the ages of history. Of course, there are many people still who know about God, how He has made Himself known, and how He has done great things on the stage of history. But people can know about God and yet refuse to retain Him in their thinking or to reckon on Him in the ordering of their lives (Rom. 1:18-21,28). It is a deliberate decision on their part and it stems from unbelief. Note also that the wise, religious men of the Philistines had some idea of guilt in relation to God and some awareness of the idea of atonement (2-3). There is even a faint hint of Gospel truth in that they recognised that all had sinned against God (v.4-5; cf. Rom. 3:23). The message of the priest was accurate in that it made plain that sin gets people into trouble with God and that guilt is the great problem that has to be dealt with. But, of course, their idea of atonement and propitiation (meeting the guilt and turning away the wrath) was of something that they had to do for themselves. It was going to cost them a lot of gold. But sinners are not redeemed with silver or gold. The price of forgiveness is far greater. (1 Peter 1:18-19)

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6:10-16

We must look back to v.7-9 in order to set the scene. The Philistines were aware that the situation was beyond them and they were looking to the "gods" to guide them. The sign they sought for was indeed miraculous because the cows would not naturally leave their calves nor would they take kindly to being yoked to a heavy cart. The fact that the beasts headed directly towards Israelite territory was taken as confirmation that it had indeed been the hand of Israel's God that had been on them for rebuke and judgment. It had not been simply "bad luck" or "just one of those things that happen". The significant thing is that as soon as the lords of the Philistines were persuaded that the God of Israel had indeed been dealing with them and that He was now safely back in His own territory (as they thought), they returned home to their old way of life. There was still no desire to have any personal dealings with God. We see the same kind of thing when people go through a crisis, turning to God in prayer, seeking for and glad of the help and support of Christians, even coming to church. But as soon as the crisis is over they lapse back so quickly to their former life of unbelief. The lords of the Philistines were even witnesses of the rejoicing of the Israelites at the return of the Ark. But even that did not impress or draw them to God. Of course, as we shall see, the worship and praise of the Israelites was far from being honouring to God, and was not acceptable to Him. When hearts, lives and attitudes are not pleasing to God there is neither witness nor power in our services of praise and worship. God's declaration in Ezekiel 36:23 is searching. Witness and impact operate when God's holiness and integrity are manifest in His people. This must be kept in mind when we think of evangelism.

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6:17-21

Bethshemesh was probably the nearest Israelite town to Ekron, from where the Ark began its journey. The inhabitants were going about their work at harvest-time when they saw the return of the Ark and they reacted with instant rejoicing. But there seems to have been undue familiarity in their dealing with the Ark, some open irreverence that cast doubt on the reality and spirituality of their rejoicing. Indeed there seems to have been blasphemy, for no true Israelite would have dared to open the Ark and look into it. They may have claimed they were just checking to make sure all the contents were there, but their actions made plain that their sense of reverence was sadly lacking and their spiritual values were distorted. It seems that they had lost all awareness of the holiness of God and they were handling the things of God as if they were cheap and ordinary. We are not making a case here for rigid ritual and observances in church life nor for conformity of dress and behaviour. But without doubt we all need to take more care than we do with regard to how we deal with God's church, God's Word and God's praise. We would not behave unworthily or cheaply at a friend's wedding, lest we grieved and disappointed them. God's worship and service deserve at least the same concern. It is clear that God took this situation seriously, because His judgment was manifested. Remember that the whole life and work of the nation was at a significant new beginning. This was not a time for careless handling of what belonged to God. Note too that the Israelites reacted just as the Philistines had. They did not want an active, holy God among them (20-21).

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7:1-6

The story now begins to develop in a positive and hopeful way. The men of Kiriath-jearim wanted the symbol of God's presence to be with them and they showed a genuine reverence in their handling of the Ark. Their faith, though limited, seemed to be genuine. They were not put off by the solemn things that had happened to both the Philistines and the people of Bethshemesh, whose stories they doubtless knew. Perhaps there was the beginning of a new hunger for God's blessing, but while real reverence for the Ark was shown there does not seem to have been an awakening of true worship. There do not seem to have been indications or evidences of any radical change resulting from the "re-appearance" of God within the borders of Israel. This went on for twenty years, until at last the whole of Israel mourned and sought after the Lord. Was God unwilling to bless and restore His people? That is never the case. But the people had to learn deeply the seriousness of their sin in departing from God, and they had to learn that there is no such thing as easy repentance. It takes time for backsliders to begin to hunger and thirst

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after righteousness and to come to the stage when self pity and remorse change to true repentance (2 Cor. 7:8-11). This is the stage reached in v.3-4 and we must assume that Samuel's ministry was by now established and exercised right through the nation (7:15-17). This being so, we must recognise that part of the function of true ministry is to convict of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8) This is the work of the Holy Spirit alone, but the preacher's words, spoken in grace, are the vehicle of the Spirit's work. Note that Samuel's words in v.3 are straight and to the point. A merely emotional response to God's Word is of no use. There must be a turning away from sin and a new commitment to God in practical terms. This is the stage reached in these verses.

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7:1-6

We must not think that Samuel's reference to his prayers of intercession means that he was only then beginning to pray for God's people and God's work. He was an intercessor all through his ministry and we are not given much indication that he ever had anyone to share this prayer burden with him. Even when he was rejected by the people he had served, he still prayed on for them (12:23), and something of his stature as a prayer-warrior, a man trusted and listened to by God, is recorded in Jer. 15:1. When you think of Samuel's character, his ministry, his prayers, his integrity and his commitment to God, it is not surprising that he was instrumental in turning the whole nation back to God. This is not a day, then or now, for being half-hearted in relation to God. It is a time for recognising the failures of the past and making a new start. By God's grace there is opportunity for the future. But look what Samuel called for: wholeheartedness; a putting away from lives of what had no right to be there, because it was an offence to God and a contradiction of testimony; hearts directed to God with deliberate seeking after Him; and a commitment to service. Having been challenged, the people responded publicly. They came together for mutual support and encouragement. They asked for the prayers of the prophet, and they stood in God's presence in an act of sacrifice. We must not read too much into the pouring out of the water in the sacrifice, but we do well to remember that a great price was paid so that our sins could be washed away. We need to remember that if we are in Christ we are new creatures, the old has passed away, and we go forward with the God who makes all things new (2 Cor. 5:17; Rev. 21:5).

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7:7-11

Keep in mind that the place of this new dedication was not many miles from the border of Israel and without doubt the Philistines had been watching carefully to see what reaction there would be to the presence of the Ark among the Israelites. The immediate result of this new consecration on the part of the people of God was an almighty eruption of the power of the enemy. We should never be surprised by this happening, whether in individual lives or in relation to the work of the church. Think back to the story of the birth of Jesus and remember the hideous manifestation of evil in the slaughter of the innocents by devil-inspired Herod (Matt. 2:16). The Devil does not like it when believers begin to be in earnest with God, because such commitment is a threat to his kingdom. He tries, by noise and threat, to produce a reaction among God's people that will make them have second thoughts about consecration and service, or at least to hold them back from the business of going forward with God. We must never forget there is an angry Devil (Rev. 12:12) and while at times he is crafty and subtle, appearing like an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14), at other times he is like a roaring lion seeking which one he may devour (1 Pet. 5:8). Note well that the reaction of the people was to cry to Samuel for prayer. They had not yet learned to pray themselves, and that is the situation of many believers whose "prayer life" is largely routine and very self-centred. Prayer was made and prayer was answered almost at the same time and the Lord thundered. When will we learn that prayer is not a "last resort" when all else has failed? In every situation our first reaction should be to "take it to the Lord in prayer."

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7:12-17

When the crisis first burst in on Israel the reaction had been fear (7), and this is an effective weapon of the enemy, whether human or devilish, because it focuses attention on the problems rather than on the God who delivers. Of course, fear was a natural reaction for a people who had so recently and so repeatedly been defeated by their enemies. But these defeats had come because the people had been adrift from, disobedient to and forgetful of their God. Now they were forgiven and restored and they had to recognise that former disasters had in fact been God's gracious disciplines to bring them to repentance (Heb. 12:5-11). God had been working for their good, as He does in all things and circumstances (Rom. 8:28). The people had now to realise, rest on and count on the fact that God was for them, not against them (Rom. 8:31). There is no need to fear even armies of enemies because the "hosts of God" encamp round the people of God (2 Kings 6:15-17). There are two ways to understand v.12, depending on what translation we use. Samuel was instituting a memorial of some kind to encourage the people to look back, to remember past mercies and deliverances, to count their blessings, and to encourage them to believe that the God who saved and delivered in the past would do so again. Hitherto the Lord has helped us. He will not change. But the verse could also read, "Thus far the Lord has helped us." By His grace the work has begun to move forward; the first steps have been taken, the first battle has been won and this is the token that He is with us and His hand is on us. The message echoes the word of God to the people through Moses at another great crisis at the beginning of a new stage in the work. "Speak to the children of Israel that they go forward" (Exodus 14:10-18).

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7:12-17

What a reminder we have in v.13 that God is the defence of His people! How clearly it is stated that the hand of God is well able to subdue and restrain the powers of evil. Why do we keep on thinking and feeling that the Devil is powerful? He is a defeated foe. His plans and works are destroyed (Col. 2:15; 1 John 3:8). And, in Christ, we are able to quench all the fiery darts of the evil one (Eph. 6:16). We are told also in v.14 that in the mercy and forgiveness of God there can be the full recovery and restoration of all that has been lost and that, in the very areas of life and experience where once we were defeated, we can now prove victorious. Prodigals can be restored to place and privilege (Lk. 15:20-24) and such is the goodness of God that the future can be so rich that the waste and loss of the past can be more than compensated (Joel 2:25). But we must not fail to see that underlying all the on-going recovery and advance of the people and work of God there was the on-going ministry, prayers, guidance and influence of Samuel. Possibly at the start of the recovery and during the first years of establishing this "new day" in the life of the nation, the people were conscious of the debt they owed to this man of God. But as the years went on and as the work was established it appears that a new complacency came upon the nation and the time came when they felt they could do without God's appointed leader. Keep in mind that Samuel's ministry and leadership lasted between forty and fifty years, a nationwide ministry which retrieved a backslidden people and set their course for the future. If we do not keep this in mind we will jump to wrong conclusions at the start of the next chapter.

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8:1-3

There is devastating honesty in the biblical record, for it lays bare the flaws and failures of even the greatest of God's servants. This reminds us of our utter dependence on God's grace from beginning to end of life and service. We must guard against carelessness and complacency (1 Cor. 10:11-13). If that is true of individuals, it is also true of congregations and all over the country there are churches that once were citadels of biblical truth and spiritual life but are thus no more. Remember that what we read here is actually taking place towards the close of a mighty, long-lasting spiritual ministry that had been much blessed by God(1a). That this happens cannot be denied (Rev. 2:1-5; 3:1-3,14-17; Gal. 1.6), but it is difficult to discern exactly why and when the decline starts. The initial stages of a work can be so fierce in battles that everyone is on the alert, but when the work is established a sense of achievement and even success can beguile the heart away from God. At the beginning a sense of gratitude for salvation and privilege in respect of service can keep a congregation and its leader close to God. But when the on-

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going work begins to feel ordinary and the spirit of the world with its pleasures and comforts steals in on us, then there is danger. Today's verses focus on Samuel's failure but v.4 will indicate that the elders of Israel may have been restless and impatient with the old man who, they felt, had gone on too long. Perhaps they resented his continuing authority. Perhaps they wanted to "experiment" with new forms of worship and activity to get away from the "sameness" of service that they felt was dull. There are always those who want things changed, who feel it right to ask for change, and who always find what seems a just reason for their request. We shall see as we go on just what God thought of it all.

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8:1-3

Two aspects of these verses need attention: the fact of Samuel's godless sons, and the strange fact that Samuel made them judges. It will be a comfort to many parents to know that even such a spiritual giant as Samuel had a broken heart about his sons who did not share or follow his faith. Perhaps Samuel was so occupied in God's work that his family was neglected. Perhaps he had tried to press them into holy ways without giving them a chance to think it all through and make the faith their own. Perhaps the father emphasised so much that they were covenant children that they grasped the privilege without understanding or responding to the duties and demands. We can be sure that Samuel prayed for his sons, praying in faith not fear, and yet they turned out badly. In spite of this Samuel made them judges. He may have thought that responsibility would bring out the best in them and make them spiritually true. But it very seldom works out that way and all of us must take great care before we appoint people to lead any piece of service in God's House. Perhaps Samuel was seeking, through his sons, to prolong his own leadership and influence, failing to recognise that his ministry was virtually fulfilled (not ended). We must be careful in saying this because Samuel had still significant work to do under God. But had Samuel forgotten the disastrous effect on Israel when old Eli made his evil sons priests? We must never allow personal preferences to cloud our spiritual judgment. Read 1 Tim. 3:1-12 and Titus 1:5-11 to see the standard requirements for those who are to be appointed to rule and guide the House and work of God. Are we not all disqualified? But by God's grace, weak though we be, we are called.

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8:4-9

Things become clearer. The elders who came were men who had been under Samuel's ministry, retrieved from backsliding and built up in their faith. But there does seem to have been something harsh about their approach although, of course, they had "evidence" and would no doubt say, "lots of people are worried." But these men were not as well taught nor as spiritual as might seem, because their request was by no means in conformity with the will of God. They wanted a king so that they would be like other nations. But they were not and could never be like other nations because they had been chosen and called out to be a separate, different and distinct people to bear God's name and to live for His glory. Note that there is no indication that Samuel resented the criticism of his sons nor did he justify or excuse his own actions in making them judges. Perhaps already his heart was burdened and grieved because of his failures. Few people, including Christians, seem to realise just how sorely burdened and penitent a leader can be because of his failures, especially the ones in the context of the life of the congregation. Few seek to minister to ministers or to help heal their hurts. A leader walks a lonely road! What grieved Samuel was the awareness that this people to whom he had given his life's work were really turning away from God. They had not been receiving the Word of God in faith as he had thought (Heb. 4:1-2). They were not pressing forward in spiritual earnestness (Heb. 3:6-19; 6:11-12; 10:23, 35-39). Note what Samuel did. He went right to God in prayer, and God made plain that what was happening was not simply that they were rejecting Samuel's person and ministry. They were rejecting God. Samuel learned then that he had a God who knew, understood and shared human feelings of hurt.

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8:4-9

Here is a disturbing lesson with regard to answered prayer. What they asked so earnestly was quite contrary to God's will but He gave it to them. In the AV Psalm 106:15 reads: "He gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul." They were determined to go their own way, and no amount of arguing by Samuel or by God would change their minds because they had already decided. Spiritual backsliding is in the heart a long time before it becomes evident in the life, but it is often camouflaged by what appears to be earnest spirituality, as is seen in these men who made the request. God, through Samuel, could have put pressure on the people, hemming them in with barriers, and even bringing further attacks from the enemy but this would not have solved the problem. Indeed it might simply have added anger and resentment which would have confirmed the people in their desire to go their own way. We must not say too easily, "God will keep me right. If I am wrong He will shut the door." That is true, if in fact we are waiting on God and seeking His will. But if we are self-willed (and we will always try to justify ourselves) then God may well let us have our own way. There are some spiritual lessons we can learn only by bitter experience. There is an example of this in the story of the determined young men in 2 Kings 2:15-18. They refused godly advice and guidance and the only way for them to learn was through fruitless labour. In the end they had to be told how wrong they had been. At times the message we need is simply, "I told you so." When God commissioned Samuel to warn the people what their request would bring, He was giving them a last chance to humble themselves. But they would not listen.

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8:10-22

Samuel may be criticised for entrusting the work of God to his godless sons but we must honour him for what we see in this passage. Knowing full well that his message would be resented, and aware that he as messenger would be hated, he nevertheless delivered the words God had commanded him to speak. The text for the sermon could well have been, "The way of the transgressor is hard," (Prov. 13:15 AV) and Samuel would be able to testify afterwards that he had indeed preached to them the whole counsel of God, holding back nothing that was profitable (Acts 20:20,27). He left the people in no doubt that the day would come when they would regret deeply the steps they were now taking, but the people simply would not listen. This is indeed evidence of the evil heart of unbelief that departs from God (Heb. 3:12). But perhaps we should see here more than just human unbelief. Do not the Scriptures speak of the god of this world who blinds the minds and hardens the hearts of those who refuse to believe (2 Cor. 4:4)? Right from the start of history, in the Garden of Eden, the lie of the Devil has been to persuade foolish men and women that there are no consequences following disobedience. But the pleasures of sin are for a short time only (Heb. 11:25) and the outworking of sin is a costly and destructive experience ending in death (Jas. 1:13-15). Go again to that passage in Heb. 3:12-15 and see there how we are exhorted and urged to have a responsibility for each other so that those who begin to slip away may be rescued before it is too late. Of course, we must be ready for bitter criticism and rejection. Neither worldly people nor Christians take kindly to being told they are going against God.

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8:10-22

Samuel may have failed in respect of his sons, but why do we so often concentrate on a person's failures? Do we not have plenty failures of our own to handle and to remedy? Link together v.6-7 and 19-22 and see Samuel's spiritual stature as he does the work of an intercessor. He went into God's presence on behalf of the people and then went into the presence of the people on behalf of God. What a ministry this was! It reminds us of the One who is far greater than Samuel, the Man Christ Jesus who ever lives to make intercession for us, and who appears in God's presence as Advocate on our behalf (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25; 1 John 2:1). Do not forget that as he exercised this ministry of prayer Samuel was in fact despised and rejected in his person and his work, by the very people for whom he prayed. See also that Samuel was a man with whom God talked, a man God trusted with His Word and His work. Like many others we read about in Scripture, Samuel walked with God (Gen. 5:22-24), he stood in the

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presence of God (Gen. 18:22), and all he did was at the command of God (1 Kings 17:1; 18:36). Now, if we have personal dealings with God on a level like this, then, and only then, have we the right to point the finger and criticise the men and women God is manifestly using to do His will. For Samuel it seemed all he had worked for all his life was being thrown away. But God was already planning and working for the future. This is something we must remember so that we will judge nothing before the time. God granted their request and in the outworking of the future years, as His people were afflicted, He shared their pain. What a God: so solemn, yet full of grace! Ponder these words: "Getting our own way is the best teacher, but the fees are high." The Prodigal Son proved that!

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9:1-10

The previous chapter described a significant spiritual crisis in the life and experience of the people of God. They had had a fundamental disagreement with God and were determined to go their own way. They wanted a king, and they were going to get a king, but God was to be in control of the whole process. After all, discipline and judgment are God's "departments" and he is the executive in charge. On the face of it this is a story of coincidences. The son of a rich farmer was looking for lost asses and when about to give up, he was advised to consult an un-named man of God whose reputation for "seeing" and foretelling was widely known. The situation is all very ordinary and unimpressive in spiritual terms. The big, handsome farmer's son had no idea he was at the major crisis point of his life. It is doubtful if he had any thoughts of God at all at this stage. Perhaps he knew that "by a majority decision" the people decided to have a king but, of course, a majority does not necessarily indicate the will of God. Today's verses could be made into a short comedy film portraying the lost asses, always ahead of Saul and his servant, the men getting more and more frustrated, not knowing that behind the scenes God Himself was leading them to a prearranged meeting. It may have been that God had told Samuel that the future king was chosen and that Samuel asked how he was going to be brought to the place and time of anointing. All Samuel was told was to go to a certain city and wait for something to happen (which is in tomorrow's passage). On the face of it there is no sign of God, but God is always there. It takes faith to believe that. But it is always true.

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9:11-14

Here is another coincidence! The seer had just arrived that day at the city and it is clear that he was well known and that there was a real reverence for him. After all, Samuel was the seer, and his ministry had been a mighty one nationwide for many years. The story has not made it plain yet, but in due time this king about to be anointed was to become the scourge of the nation and an instrument of the Devil, seeking to destroy the future King David before he could take his place for the blessing of God's people. Why then should God choose such a man? Why should Jesus with full knowledge choose Judas to be one of the Twelve? It was all part of God's plan, and it shows us, among other things, that God has complete confidence in Himself and that He is not in any sense afraid of or limited by evil. What we have to see is that God's working incorporates the working of men and devils. He is sovereign in every way but is never approving of or complicit in evil. Men and women remain responsible for their actions as they were in our story. They had insisted on having a king, and a king they would be given. But the initiative was with God. This is seen in so many Bible stories. In Jonah's case the winds, storms and big fish were all in God's service. In Joseph's story his youthful pride, his slavery, imprisonment and Pharaoh's dreams were all in God's service. The story of Esther is another example of how in a pagan situation God's salvation was worked out. In it all and at every stage God is at work (Phil. 2:12). All things work together and in all things God works (Rom. 8:28). His timing is perfect, as today's verses make plain. What a God! Read the parable in Matt. 13:24-30 and see how not even the full working of evil, long allowed, can prevent God's full harvest.

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9:15-27

The times and seasons are always in the hand of the God who refuses to be hurried (Acts 1:7). Samuel was not told until the day before Saul arrived. Perhaps God knew he might just worry if he knew too much too soon because, after all, Samuel was feeling upset about the people wanting a king. Note how specifically Samuel was instructed, nothing being left to chance and God even made plain that in and through this whole situation that was grievous to Him He still planned salvation and deliverance for His people. This is the astonishing thing about God. He is never deflected from His sovereign purposes but we must learn to think of these purposes as long-term. Even as early as this (earlier in fact), God was pressing on through history to David and to David's greater Son to be born in Bethlehem. But we must concentrate on this particular stage. At the beginning of the chapter (2) we are shown Saul as a man of personality and appearance, the kind of man who would appeal to the people who wanted to be like other nations. He was diligent and persistent, open to advice from his servant (6) and apparently had some religious awareness (7). But Saul had no knowledge of Samuel (18), in spite of his long effective ministry. In v.19 -21 Saul was somewhat mystified because so much was being said and done, and even the location of the lost asses was revealed. He was strangely submissive to Samuel, followed him to the public feast, was placed at the top table and it is made clear that he had been expected (23-24). The next morning there was indication that Saul was to be taught in the Word of God. Two things are obvious: God was in total control, directing the whole drama, and Samuel, criticised and rejected, was God's trusted servant in place to carry out God's orders.

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10:1-5

When we read in Rom.13:1 that the governing authorities ("the powers that be," - AV) have been instituted by God, we are not to think that these rulers and their actions are approved by God. It means simply that these men (and women) rise to power and exercise their power in the context of the over-ruling providence of God and to serve the long-term purpose of God. This is certainly the case with Saul who was now anointed to be king over Israel. We have already seen that the insistent demand for a king was not God's pattern for them and yet they were given a king who was to save them from the power of their enemies. What we have to see here at the start of Saul's story is that every detail is under the complete control and direction of God through the instrumentality of Samuel. The actual anointing was done in complete privacy on the outskirts of the city (9:27-10:1). At this point Saul was virtually an unknown man in Israel and the people did not know that they now had their God given king. We are not told what Saul was thinking at this stage in the proceedings but there must have been some bewilderment. After all, he had set out to look for lost asses and, still not having found them, he was told he was to be king of Israel. To reassure him Samuel promised signs of confirmation which would be unmistakable assurances. Samuel also told Saul the message in v.5-6. The place name Gibeah of God (or Hill of God) was in Philistine territory and yet there was a band of prophets whose existence Samuel was aware of. The very fact that this significant development of God's purposes was taking place in unfriendly territory should be an encouragement to us. We are far too prone to write off situations as hopeless. We need to remember God.

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10:1-8

To help us keep a balance in our trying to understand v.6, remember the words of Jesus in Matt. 7:21-23. Remember also the story of Jephthah (Jud.11:29), a man on whom the Spirit of God came for successful service but who made a terrible vow that was contrary to God. The anointing or unction or fulness of the Spirit (whatever we mean by the terms) does not make a person infallible. Remember also that, after this ecstatic meeting with the prophets, Saul was still commanded to act according to the instructions of Samuel and not on any impulse generated within himself. The Spirit of the Lord was to come on Saul to give the necessary enabling for the work God had appointed for him. The fact that he "prophesied", sharing in the ecstatic utterances, may have been a token to the prophets that here was a man God had laid His hand on. On the other hand it may have been a sign to Saul, reminding him that whatever success or power he would have in days to come he was still under God's command

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and control. Saul was also told that he would be changed into another kind of man. We could read into this all sorts of New Testament meanings regarding being born again and made new creatures in Christ, or we could think of Old Testament passages about a new heart (John 3:3-7; 2 Cor. 5:17; Ezek. 36:26). On the other hand we could think simply of Saul, the farmer's son, being changed into a king. There is no doubt that from this point Saul was a different man with a different kind of life and involved significantly in God's purposes. But, as Jesus said, a heart is identified and judged by what comes out of it. In due time we shall be able to see the kind of man Saul was by the pattern and outcome of his life. By their fruits people are known (Matt.7:15-20).

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10:9-16

The statement that God gave Saul another heart, or changed his heart, seems to lead us further than yesterday's comment. The record says that the Spirit of God came mightily on Saul with what would be called charismatic fervour and, in the company of men who were truly prophets, he was caught up in ecstasy just like theirs. But the prophets were surprised and baffled and they were left with real questionings. Now, we must be careful before we pronounce on any such happenings, either to denounce or to approve. Time will tell what is truly of God and what is not of God, and we must not assume that all that appears to be of God is necessarily of God. We are to test the spirits (1 John 4:1). If we look forward in the story to 19:18-24 we see this same "prophesying" on the part of Saul and his servants at a time when they were hunting down David, the Lord's anointed. If we look back to 18:12, we see that the Lord had departed from Saul, and yet we find him "prophesying". What then are we to make of today's passage? The Spirit of God came on Saul for specific service but it does not seem to be in the same way as with Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road. This Saul was moved but not won. He was "anointed" by God but so was the pagan ruler Cyrus (Isa. 45:1). Alexander Whyte points out that both Isaiah and the wicked Caiaphas prophesied of the atonement (Isa. 53 and John 18:14). God called Saul for specific service and the Spirit came on him mightily for enablement and capacity, but that is not necessarily the same as salvation. The "special" experience, by its very nature temporary, gives way to the narrative of v.14-16 in which Saul gives a selective account of what had been happening. Perhaps he was still bewildered about the whole experience, but perhaps he understood v.8 as a command not to speak until Samuel arrived. One thing is quite clear. Samuel was still the key figure under God.

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10:17-19

Samuel, though devalued and rejected by the people, continued with steadfast spirit to do the work of God and to speak His Word to the people. Though reviled he did not revile in return but committed himself and his work to the God who had called him (1 Pet. 2:20-23). He was faithful to his commission and his message, and his work was valid and vindicated even though the message was rejected. His words to the people are plain, factual and irrefutable. Their sin was sheer ingratitude. All they were, all they had, was from God who had saved them and brought them thus far. All their future depended on their dealing with God in faith and obedience but they had refused. Now they had to be told that for years to come they would live with the consequences of their own decision. They had created the situation. God had consented to and confirmed them in their choice. Now they would be introduced to their king. Perhaps they were a bit shocked that their insistent prayer had been answered so quickly. We need to be careful about what we pray for. God may well give us just that, and leave us to get on with it. Did the people realise they were exchanging the leadership, guidance and guardian care of the God of salvation for the leadership of a man like themselves? We need to do no more today than consider who we want to be in charge of our lives. Proverbs 3:1-8 should help to point us in the right direction.

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10:20-27

Why was this process of selection and choice needed when we have been told Saul was already anointed? It may have been to show the people that the man chosen was indeed one of themselves, the best among themselves and

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their actual choice. Of course, the whole process was under God's sovereign providence and overruling (Prov.16:33). That is a comfort in every situation where votes are taken and when decisions are made. There is a God who orders our way, whether we are aware of it or not. What the people thought of their future king hiding among baggage is not clear. Traditionally the elected Speaker of the House of Commons resists being led to the chair and there may be some such ceremonial here. It is hard to think of Saul being unwilling or afraid to take on the task in face of such unanimous invitation. And yet, his hiding may indicate something of the psychological insecurity of the man's personality, even though in appearance he was head and shoulders above everyone else (23). We know that in due time the aspects of Saul's character that dominated were unpredictability, intensity and vindictiveness. The enthusiasm of the "coronation" was cautioned by Samuel's "putting into print" the rights and duties of kingship for Saul and for the people (25). Then everyone went home, and perhaps only then did they take time to think of the implications of the decisions they had made. It is best to think and pray well before making decisions. They have long-term consequences.

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10:20-27

Read the whole chapter and consider what our own thoughts and reactions would have been if we had been part of the situation. Would we have been aware of God and of the developing situation being directed by God? But what of our own present situations? Do we discern God in them? Do we seek the guidance of God or do we simply tackle the situations on the basis of apparent human factors? There is a principle for knowing God's will enunciated in Rom. 12:1-2 and it calls for a surrender of life to God and a guard against worldly thinking. We must remember that God is at work, often in ways that seem paradoxical to us, and we must be careful not to end up at cross-purposes with God. This is what we see at the end of the chapter. We do not think of Saul as perfect. Nor do we ignore the fact that the clamour for a king was not pleasing to God. But, the situation having now been brought about by God, those who were right with God would go along with it. It was a situation and principle similar to that recorded in Jer. 27:16-17. To serve Babylon seemed a contradiction of all Israel stood for, but in the overruling of God it was the way to go. Brave men with hearts touched by God went to follow the warrior king. After all, he was the Lord's anointed. But other men, with a mean and spiteful spirit, seeing nothing of God in it all, despised Saul. There are always those who are "against". They are essentially negative, and a fruitful source of help to the Devil. Saul held his peace, but his vengeful spirit may simply have marked them out to be dealt with later. It was not a pleasant situation. It never is when discontented people are adrift from God.

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11:1-4

It is increasingly clear, as the Old Testament story develops, that at every significant stage of the development of God's purposes for His people there is an outburst of activity from the enemy. This is a lesson we must learn well in our personal Christian lives also. There is an enemy who is resolutely opposed to our going on with God. Never forget the angry Devil (Rev. 12:12) whose attacks are calculated to cause panic (1 Pet. 5:8). Of course the Devil comes in a variety of disguises. Here it is the Ammonites and they, along with the Moabites and the Ishmaelites, originated through the folly and transgression of Lot and Abraham (Gen. 19:37-38; 16:2). How true it is that the evil that men do can often live on long after them! Attitudes and actions have consequences and we see here how the spiritual backsliding of Israel had left the men of Jabesh-Gilead weak, demoralised and ready to surrender at the first threat. When others heard of the threat they also found they had no fight left in them and they wept. They failed to remember the great victories the Lord had given them in earlier days against the Ammonites (Judges 11:32-33). They had lost all awareness of what their God could do. Of course, it was the sins of the nation that had allowed this resurgence of evil to take place. The sins of the nation had made the people weak and sorry for themselves and the Ammonites were bold and cruel, setting hard terms for a treaty (2). The blinding of the right eyes would mean disgrace and humiliation as well as making the men useless for fighting. There is no sign of anyone thinking about God! But remember, all this was happening after two significant things. Saul had been

anointed as king by the command of God and some were regarding him with contempt (10:27). There were lessons to be learned, and God was the teacher.

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12:5-11

There are lessons to be learned here for all who are involved in the work of God. The first is that the Devil had gone too far (as he usually does) and Saul was galvanised into action. With authority and confidence he conscripted the army in a way that simply swept away reluctance and fear. The actions of the Ammonites united the people under Saul in a way nothing else could have done. A crisis can be a good thing. It can clear the thinking. We are told that Saul, though anointed as king, was still at his farm. Why had he not taken his place as king? Remember that there was a Philistine garrison and the nation was not free (10:5). So far there had been no rallying point or cause to unite the people. It is one thing to shout "Hurrah!" but another thing to commit yourself to the work. Many a congregation is glad to get an evangelical minister but that does not mean he will have the practical support of the people. As we have already mentioned, opposition to Saul was real (10:27) and it is difficult to go ahead of public opinion even when you are in the right. Fools rush in where angels fear to tread, and few of us are angels. We need wisdom in respect of timing lest we stir unnecessary antagonism or set in motion activities that will soon abort and bring shame on the work of God. There is a time to speak and a time to be silent and a time for everything else (Eccles. 3:1-8). It is interesting that Saul, by the Spirit of God, knew the right time had come and there was no hesitation. His words were challenge not comfort and the people came together ready for battle, not simply because of Saul's challenge but because the fear of the Lord laid hold on them (7). They became aware of God in a way they had not known for a long time. With that came obedience, and with obedience there came courage, comfort and resolution.

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12:12-15

Here is the account of the reaction of the people after the battle had been won decisively. The people were now committed to Saul as king, not so much because of God's call and Samuel's anointing, but because of the human success and the benefits it brought. But woe to the leader of God's work who has to depend on "successes" to keep the people happy. When Moses worked miracles, dividing the sea, he was regarded as a God-given leader but when the way forward was costly he was slandered (Ex. 16:1-3). When Jesus fed the multitudes they wanted Him as king, but when He spoke of the cost of discipleship many "disciples" walked no more with Him (John 6:66). In our story there was a sudden, enthusiastic consecration to God's work that was both extreme and carnal and could have led to a vendetta that could well have got out of hand. If the Devil cannot hinder by casual indifference he may try to do so by exaggerated spirituality. In this situation we see Saul at his height, turning the thoughts of the people to God who had given them the victory and insisting that there would be no panic actions, no vengeance and no forgetting how grim discipline had been needed to awaken the people to God. We can so easily get proud of our spirituality. It was at this point that Samuel, God's spokesman, took the lead, summoning the people to Gilgal, a place of hallowed memory (Josh. 4:19-24; 5:9-15). They were to be reminded of the God who rolls away the guilt and shame of the past; the God who provides the manna when it is needed;

the God who provides the food of the land when His people walk in the obedience of faith. The service of dedication and consecration was solemn and joyful. It always is when we come back to God. Read Ps. 116:5-7, 12-14, 17-19.

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12:1-5

The end of the previous chapter recorded the public coronation of Saul as king, an occasion of enthusiasm for the future and of great rejoicing. This seems to be the context of Samuel's address to the people. His words are a mixture of testimony, challenge, counsel and warning. The people listened, because although they had rejected

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both Samuel and his spiritual leadership, they still felt something of the strength and stature of this spiritual giant whose ministry had reinstated the Word of God in the nation. Popular acclaim does not necessarily authenticate a man's ministry nor does popular rejection invalidate it. Samuel made it clear that the new situation in Israel was the result of their specific request (1). This was something they had to remember when the situation became hard to live with (8:10-18). It is something we need to learn so that we will be kept from saying in self pity, "Why should this happen to me?" Many, though not all, situations are of our own making, the result of choices we have made, often ignoring advice. It seems from v.2 that Samuel sensed that the people felt he was now too old to be their spiritual leader and he acknowledged his age, indicating that he was aware that his sons were not living right lives (8:5). He hid nothing. But at the same time he testified to the basic, long-term integrity of his whole way of life as a man of God. The people agreed. They could not do otherwise. Samuel had been a man who had walked with God, out in the open with nothing to hide, and therein lay the secret of his spiritual usefulness. Samuel's ministry had not been meteoric, hitting the headlines, but steady and rock-like. Something of his stature is seen in the address he now delivered. The people would go forward without his leadership but he would do his best to point them in the right direction with a right attitude.

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12:6-18

The text for Samuel's sermon could well have been Prov. 14:34. The ingredients of righteousness and sin are both powerful and active in personal and national life. Right from the start Samuel fixed the people's thoughts on God. He called on them to think of God, to relate to Him, and to consider His ways with them. This is how every service and sermon should start. The words, "Let us worship God," are not just an ecclesiastical formula indicating the service has started (and in some congregations the chattering does not even stop), but a statement and a call identifying the purpose of the gathering and of every part of it. Samuel subdued the excitement of the people and called them to think of how all that they were, all they had, and all the way they had progressed had come from the God who had worked salvation for them (7). This again is something we need to be reminded of because it is so easy to become spiritually complacent, proud of our spirituality, especially in comparison with others. When this happens we become careless about spiritual duty and begin to take liberties with God, assuming that we are so important to God that He will make allowances for us. This warning does not in any sense contradict the biblical message of the wonderful forgiveness and restoring grace of God. But it does make us stop to think, and to realise just where we might have been and what we might have become in personality and life apart from the goodness and mercy of God. How we need to keep fresh in mind and heart the spirit that says, "O give thanks to the Lord for He is good, for His mercy endures for ever" (Ps. 106:1). To live without God's grace and salvation scarcely bears thinking about.

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12:6-18

Having made plain that their origin and continuance were both due to the grace of God alone (Dent. 7:6-8), and having emphasised that being a redeemed people they were not and never could be their own (I Cor. 6:9,20), Samuel went on to emphasise that the pattern of God's dealings with His people is always the same. When the people were disobedient and unfaithful they fell under the oppression of their enemies and remained so until the disciplines of pain and unhappiness brought conviction of sin and they cried to God. Repentance brought restoration. In v.14-15 we have the principle stated with utter clarity. We have the message repeated in 2 Chron. 7:12-22. In today's passage (16-18) we are told of how, by a miraculous sign, God confirmed the message and vindicated His servant Samuel in the sight of all the people. It was an alarming experience, confirming to the people that they were indeed in the hand of the God of might, majesty and power. It was also a clear message that all their future hope was in the hand of God, because a terrible downpour of rain at harvest time would ruin a great part of the harvest and bring economic consequences. What the people then (and we now) had to do was to recognise that in all the business of life, personally and nationally, we have God to deal with because He is dealing

with us. Christians though we be, we tend to explain all the unhappy and unpleasant things happening in the nation in terms of governments and economics. But the root of the problem is moral and spiritual wrong. It is all very solemn, but we must not fail to see that again and again the Lord listened to the cry of the people; again and again He restored them to His blessing, declaring His love for them, in spite of everything. What a God to have!

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12:19-25

It is interesting that when the people were sobered in their thinking they feared the Lord and stood in awe of the prophet (18). Their next reaction was to ask Samuel to pray for them. They seemed penitent. They seemed to be deeply moved spiritually. But holiness produced by thunderstorms can begin to fade as soon as the skies clear again. It does seem that the people had become aware that their present situation, which they were not now too happy about, had stemmed from decisions and attitudes over a long spell of time (19). Samuel did not make light of their sin. It is never right or wise to give people the impression that wrong-doing does not matter. But at the same time Samuel refused to let them pine regretfully about the past. That is not a good or helpful attitude and it can in fact anchor people's feelings in the past so that sooner or later they go back to the wrongs of the past. Look to the future, says Samuel, serve the Lord, give yourself to God with a new realism and refuse to be side-tracked by all sorts of things that have no real spiritual value or benefit. This is a call echoed in Hebrews 12:1-2. It takes a deliberate decision to lay aside weights and things that clutter up our Christian lives so that we can go on with God into a positive future of service and blessing. Yes, service first and blessing second. It is the root that produces the fruit. A life of service is self-denying and yet self-fulfilling. A life that sets pleasure and satisfaction first is a life that dries out progressively and leaves a person disgruntled and unhappy, with nothing but regrets at what might have been. This is what Jesus said when He spoke about saving our lives or losing them (Matt. 16:24-26).

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12:19-25

Our hope for the future lies in the character of God, the faithfulness of His covenant, His commitment to His people, and His love that will not let us go (Jer. 31:3; Isa. 49:14-16; Hosea 11:8). There is immense encouragement and hope in v.22 and it is echoed in wonderful terms in 2 Tim. 2:13. God is greater than any or all of our failures, and when He begins to work in us as individual's or congregations He goes on resolutely until His objective is reached (Phil. 1:6; 1 Thess. 5:23-24). We see also, in today's verses, the spiritual stature of Samuel, Having carried his people on his heart for so long and having led them thus far, he was not going to stop praying for them now just because they had devalued and rejected him. Nor would he stop teaching them, counselling and advising them, because he knew, even if they did not, that no believer ever reaches the stage when he or she no longer needs the instruction, blessing and therapy of God's Word. We can be sure that when our taste and appetite for God's Word declines, then things are not well with our spiritual life. The exhortation in v.24 is one we need constantly. Think for example, how after Christmas and New Year so many prayer meetings are sluggish and Christians say, "I'm just so tired," and in Sunday services there is little buoyancy in praise, little eagerness for God's Word, and a lack of liberty in preaching. Is there not something wrong? Have we not forgotten the great things God has done for us and how good He has been to us? Is jaded service a worthy response? Be careful. Be awake. You may lose out.

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13:1-7

The different translations of the Bible give vastly different figures for Saul's age and the length of his reign. Some indication of the length of Saul's reign is found in Acts 13:21. In 1 Sam. 9:2 Saul is described as a young man working on his father's farm, and in today's passage he has a son, Jonathan, old enough to command a thousand men. We have to assume then that quite a spell of time passed between the end of the previous chapter and the story we now read. Saul had been king for some time and his rule was established. His stand against the Philistines had been consistent and successful to the point that they were resentful. When we read v.6 we see that in spite of a

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succession of victories on the battle-field the nation and people were not really in very good heart. It takes more than a few "successes" to establish a work in good heart spiritually, and this is something that has to be kept in mind by ministers and missionaries and all who pray for them. Saul was king and he revelled in his position and work, but it is clear from chapter 12 that Samuel still had a tremendous influence. It may be that Saul found this irksome, because young people like to "do their own thing" without the "old men" trying to interfere. It may be, therefore, that in v.2 Saul's sending home part of his army shows that he was already beginning to be self-confident. But it was not long before there had to be a call to the whole nation to muster. It was then that Israel became aware of just how great a battle was waiting for them and confidence was low. It may well be that the strike against Geba was precipitate or even unnecessary and the result of this action, that had not been thought through or prayed through, was that the people of God and their work faced crisis that need not have been.

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13:1-7

We return to this passage to emphasise the lesson that action at the wrong time is counter-productive. Saul was an enthusiast and that in itself is a good thing. But enthusiasm needs to be controlled and not allowed to launch itself at every situation that seems to promise victory. All who serve in the work of God must learn to look at things long-term and to be aware that the enemy will be waiting to take advantage of any wrong step taken. The size of the Philistine army is staggering (5) and indicates just how far down the nation of Israel had sunk to be in general subjection to such an enemy. Saul's warriors have to be seen in terms of something of a guerrilla army, constantly on the move, and finding hiding places in the hill country north of the Dead Sea and west of the Jordan. But the picture here is not of an eager, nationalistic force ready to strike for the freedom of their country. They seem to have forgotten completely the resounding victory given by God and recorded in 11:11 and there seems to have been a general desertion, some even crossing Jordan in the interest of personal safety. It is all very human because it takes a long time to restore the morale and vitality of a people who have lapsed into spiritual doldrums. This is a word of counsel to all those called to restore a backslidden situation. People can be enthusiastic after one or two significant successes but when it becomes clear that a long-term commitment to spiritual warfare is required, many make plain they have no heart for that kind of thing. This creates problems for the leader of the work, as we shall see in the following verses. The challenge is clear. Can we be counted on when the crisis comes?

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13:8-14

We must not allow the obvious difficulties in this chapter to cloud important spiritual lessons. In v.8 we seem to be being referred back to 10:8 but we have already suggested that quite a number of years had elapsed since then. Obviously Saul felt under obligation to wait seven days and it seems that again Samuel had given instruction to wait. This suggests that Samuel, although rejected, still exercised full spiritual guidance within the nation and that he was aware of Saul's impetuous, self-confident nature. Of course, waiting on God and waiting for God to speak and act clearly and decisively does not come easily to any of us. It calls for faith and trust, believing that God always knows what He is doing and that His timing is always perfect. It is not clear if Samuel was late in arriving or arrived virtually at the end of the seventh day. What is clear is that Saul was aware that his army was drifting away in a significantly. Compare the figures in vs. 2 and 15. Saul does not seem to have questioned his wisdom in sounding the call to arms (3) nor does he seem to have considered the possibility that if he pulled out from the confrontation then the Philistines might also withdraw. Saul also seemed to leave out of his reckoning the fact that over long years Samuel had been proved to be the trustworthy prophet of God. All in all it does seem that in this situation Saul made his calculations on a merely human basis of statistics, leaving God out of the reckoning. He forgot that in everything he was totally dependent on God, and that to go forward without the assurance of God's seal and presence was folly. It was also disobedience. Wait upon God, especially if you are feeling restless or over-confident. Consider Isa. 26:3-4; 28:16; 30:15. Waiting on God is a good remedy for spiritual weakness (Isa. 40:28-41).

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13:8-14

We may have found it difficult to understand this passage but Samuel left Saul in no doubt. He had done wrong and significant consequences would follow, though not necessarily immediately. Samuel does not seem to have rebuked Saul for presuming to take to himself the office of priest and conducting the sacrifice although he had no right to do so. The rebuke was for disobedience to God (13). Saul justified his action, saying that circumstances required it, and, in any case, Samuel had been late. Of course, right from the Garden of Eden people have blamed others for their sins, and underlying this there is the suggestion that God had been unreasonable. In v.12 Saul is protesting that he "had to do it"; the people were in danger; and he could not go to battle without sacrificing to the Lord. But the ritual of worship has no value apart from the obedience that comes from faith. To obey is better than sacrifice (1 Sam.15:22). If Saul had not been challenged he would have covered up his disobedience and gone on as leader of God's people and work with all the appearance of being God's man. But God looks on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7). Note that Saul was not dismissed and removed from his position as king there and then. He was yet to do many mighty deeds, but the succession to the throne was taken from his family. Another man was already marked out to be a far greater king than Saul could ever have been, a man after God's own heart (v.14; Acts 13:22). David has not yet come into sight in the story but the scene is set. God always has the future organised. That is another reason why we need to learn to wait on Him.

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13:15-23

We noted yesterday that Saul was not removed from his public position as king and leader, and we see him here continuing his preparations for war against the Philistines. But he was a man already rejected, laid aside as of very limited use for a restricted period of time. In 1966 we wrote this comment on Saul: "A man is brought within the sphere of some particular work of God. He is involved in its development and expression, taking part, doing good, and even for a season becoming a leader and an encouragement to many, yet he may have no real abiding part in the finished work. He will arrive, tarry, depart and be lost sight of because he did not belong (1 John 2:19) even if he is sorely missed and mourned (16:1-2). But we must be careful, for the rejected one may still be very much in evidence and a force still to be reckoned with, just like the Devil. We know how dark Saul's story becomes before it is finished. Saul is a grim warning to us. He was in the thick of the work, won victories and reputations, offered sacrifices in time of need, but his will was never broken. The basic impulse of his personality was never controlled by God. He would do exploits for God but he would never become a glad bond slave of God. He was too big in his own eyes for that. He was given wonderful opportunities, but was weighed in the balance of God and found wanting." The picture we have in today's verses is of Saul going on with his task of leadership, but God was not with him in the way he had been at the beginning. To what extent was Saul really aware of this solemn fact? He may have been just like Samson in Judges 16:20.

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13:15-23

It is important to read the Bible carefully lest in v.19-22 we fail to note the vivid account of the humiliation of the nation of Israel at the hands of the Philistines. Some suggest this cannot be taken at face value because of the account of the great victory in 11:11, which would have required swords and would also have given swords and spears by way of booty after the victory. But such was the general dominance of the Philistines that there would be regular incursions to subdue Israel, to leave garrisons of soldiers to keep the peace, and to forbid any manifestations of nationalism or carrying of arms. No doubt there would be spies and secret police. Such was the domination that even farming implements had to be sharpened under scrutiny. The possibility of throwing off the Philistine yoke seemed remote, but in the next chapter we have an exploit by Jonathan, and some chapters later we find Goliath with his mighty sword and total confidence overcome by young David with a sling and a few pebbles.

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The lesson is quite clear. We must not put our confidence in human capacity, be it armaments, equipment, techniques, personalities or even spiritual gifts. Apart from the presence and power of God all that we have and are able to do comes to nothing. Power belongs to God alone, and the weapons of our warfare are not worldly or fleshly (2 Cor. 10:3-4). The battle is the Lord's and His resources are limitless. But they are exercised only on behalf of those who walk in the obedience of faith. Where is our trust fixed? We have been learning the lesson: wait on God and look to God.

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14:1-15

On the face of it this was a reckless but successful venture by a courageous young man, the king's son, who set off without the knowledge or consent of his father. Keep in mind that God was using the Philistines to discipline His people and to prepare them for the future, but at the same time He was beginning to judge the Philistines for their cruel tyranny and persecution of Israel. It may have been that Saul, having been rebuked by Samuel, was sulking and being unco-operative, just as some people in a congregation can be difficult and obstructive if they are offended about something. In a situation like this God simply gets on with His work and people are in danger of being left so far behind that they never regain their true and fruitful place in Christian service. We may have here one of the first faint signs that Saul was slipping away from God. No one may have noticed this. Jonathan, of course, may have had some awareness that his father needed some "shot in the arm" encouragement to stir him up to true leadership and it could well have been this rather than a desire to make a name for himself that prompted his action. On the other hand this venture could have been simply the eager, impulsive action of youth, without a great deal of thought as to long-term consequences. Yet there is confidence in God (6b) but no presumption (6a). The armour bearer had no hesitation in following Jonathan and that is an indication of the regard he had for his master. Jonathan seems to have had an on-going desire for guidance and confirmation from God (9-10), and this mingled with the expectation of youthful faith led to a resounding victory. Perhaps in an age obsessed with statistics we should take v.6b as the lesson for today and remember that with God nothing shall be impossible.

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14:16-23

The last verses of yesterday's passage make plain that Jonathan's two-man commando raid resulted in a major panic in the army of the Philistines. If this seems surprising, especially in view of the casual confidence in v.12, then we can only conclude that it was the work of the Holy Spirit. We should see here an example of how easily and swiftly the forces of the Devil can be put to flight. It seems there was an earthquake (15), although the description may simply suggest there was so much commotion that it seemed like an earthquake. Whatever explanation we choose, it was God's doing. His methods are varied and limitless. Saul became aware that there was something big going on and must have realised with shock that a victory was being won without his being involved. God was doing something and he was not part of it! Perhaps Samuel's words in 13:13-14 flashed into his mind and he may have wondered if his time was running out already. In any event he was galvanised into action to find out who had taken leadership without his knowledge or permission. When he knew it was his own son, he seems to have become very spiritual, concerned to wait upon God (as Samuel had told him to do previously) and very earnest to know God's will. But very soon, as the noise from the Philistine camp grew louder, Saul got impatient with the process of consulting the ark (or the ephod) and said to the priest, "Withdraw your hand!" Our equivalent would be someone saying, and saying loudly, "Amen, let's go," before the prayer was anywhere near finished. Saul, and his troops, went rushing into the battle, and we think more about this tomorrow.

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14:16-23

Keep in mind that Saul seemed to be too impatient to take time to ask what God was saying to him personally in this rather unexpected development in the situation. It may be that he had such a high opinion of himself that he

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could not imagine God working, or wanting to work, without involving him. But God is very wise in His working and in His allocating of work and we must never assume that, simply because we see God at work somewhere, we should automatically get involved. There are too many Christians who rush around getting involved here, there and everywhere except in the work God has called them to in their own congregations. And, there are times when the vital thing for us is to be taken aside out of active service for a variety of reasons, not least necessary rest to prepare us for future service. Read Mark 6:7-13, 30-31 and see how the disciples, eager and excited with the fruit of their God-given service, were taken aside for their own safety. We see in 2 Cor.10:13-18 how wise and careful Paul was in this matter of discerning what was *his* work and what was given to others to do. In today's verses we may be reading too much into the story to say that Saul's intervention caused nothing but confusion, because the outcome was glorious. We are told in v.23 that it was God who had delivered Israel. But note that it was the exciting success that brought Hebrew defectors out to join the winning side, and also brought out those who had hidden themselves away in the difficult and costly days. They all had a share in that day's victory, but that does not mean that they had all come back to God in faith and penitence. A surge of religious excitement in the context of a successful venture is not the same as revival.

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14:24-30

We have already suggested that Saul rushed into this situation to assert his leadership and to guard his reputation, and these motives seem to underlie his action in putting the army under oath to eat no food. From a practical point of view it was a stupid thing to do because a hungry army cannot fight at its best. This is also true on the spiritual level and neither congregations nor individual Christians can function and serve well unless they are being fed regularly with authentic spiritual food. Ministers must see to it that their people are fed a balanced diet of the good Word of God and congregations must be willing to be fed true spiritual bread and not demand "fancy cakes". We must note carefully what a powerful hold Saul had over the people, because they obeyed his command even though they were growing weak through lack of food. Saul was a strong character but it was his own distorted will rather than God's good will that he imposed on the people. Saul was becoming a tyrant and that is a constant temptation to all those who are called to lead. It is also a temptation to those who want to be leaders and to have influence over others, even though that is not God's will for them. The influence of a strong personality is not necessarily a good spiritual influence and it was Saul's own son who spoke out and said his father had been wrong and had done harm to the people and the work of God. The lesson is quite clear. If we are not right with God our involvement in and our interfering with the ongoing work of God will do harm. Saul had to learn (and he never really did) that only the man or woman yielded gladly to the mastery of God is capable of safe leadership. Jesus spoke of this in Matt. 20:20-28. Perhaps we should read George Matheson's hymn, "Make me a captive, Lord."

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14:31-35

What we are seeing is the gradual but progressive disintegration of Saul spiritually, psychologically and morally, and it all stemmed from the fact that his proud will was not yielded to God. By his rash vow, which was simply a show of spirituality and authority, he had put his army under impossible strain. Then, when the battle was won and the people were free from the vow (24), the excessive hunger made them grab and devour the food nearest them. Such was their desperation, caused by Saul's foolishness, that they forgot all the regulations about the ritual killing of animals for food. Even Saul realised that this was blatant disregard of God's laws and he took immediate action to remedy and regularise the situation. Of course, it is open to question if Saul had the right to build an altar on his own initiative. We may also wonder if Saul did this more to affirm and establish his spiritual leadership (about which the people must have had doubts by then) than to bring all the people back to God. But there is one thing startlingly clear in the story. It was Saul's own proud foolishness in imposing the vow (24) in the first place that led the people into the crisis. It is not too strong to say that it was their own leader who drove them to sin against God, but Saul seems to have had no awareness of what he was doing. Perhaps he felt strong enough to extricate himself

from the mess. But what of those who had been led astray into activity contrary to God? We need to ponder well Jesus' warning about causing others to stumble and fall (Matt. 18:6) and then go on to Paul's earnest concern lest he should harm another believer who is precious to God (1 Cor. 8:9-13).

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14:36-46

Saul was being carried forward by his own momentum. He had built an altar to "rectify" the situation regarding the people's sins but he had no thought of his own sins of pride, disobedience and wilfulness. He saw no reason why he should not lead the people on to complete the victory and he was full of confidence. The people seem to have been either sullen or just afraid of the man and said, "Do what you want." But there was a priest with enough courage to say to the king, "Would you not be best to ask God first?" Saul asked God, but there was no answer. This was not surprising because most of the time Saul was not prepared to listen to God. After all, God is not a servant to be at our beck and call on the occasions we feel we would like Him to be around. Read Zech. 7: 8-14, especially v.13, and it will do our prayer life a great deal of good. In our story, Saul is again being very spiritual and tells the people that the reason for God's silence and non-cooperation is obvious. Someone had sinned. He declared it could be anyone, even his own son Jonathan, and whoever it was would pay the price. Saul was assuming, of course, that the fault was not in himself. There is no sign that he thought of going quietly into God's presence and saying, "Lord, is it I?" But are we not all guilty of the tendency to blame others? We do not overlook the fact that in his official, public prayer, Saul mentions himself as one of the possibly guilty parties (41) but the remainder of the passage makes plain that it never once crossed his mind that it was his own foolish oath (24) that was the beginning of the problem. The trouble with backsliding is that we cannot see anything clearly (Ps. 36:9).

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14:36-46

We stay with this passage in order to consider the silence of the people (39) until they spoke out significantly to retrieve the situation in v.45. Such was the apparent dominance of Saul that not even his own son was able to speak up. Jonathan was loyal, and would not create a situation that would have publicly challenged his father's leadership. But the people knew the situation, and it is a sad day when people know that their God-given leader has drifted away from God and is at cross-purposes with God. But they too were loyal. Perhaps some of them were wishing that Samuel was there to sort out the confusion and the potential disaster. Remember that Jonathan's life was at stake and the young man had still a great and significant part to play in the outworking of God's purposes. Jonathan was to be the supporter, encourager and, indeed, the protector of David who was in due time to be king. We must see how Saul's foolish wilfulness was imperiling not only his own spiritual life and his son's life but the future of God's work. A backslider interfering in and having leadership in God's work is a terrible prospect. Although not stated in the passage, it seems that Saul was looking rather for the person who had disobeyed him than the person who had disobeyed God. When finally Jonathan was named and he made open confession about the honey, Saul ignored the fact that it was Jonathan who had won the victory and pronounced the death sentence. At that point the people had had enough. They spoke out in no uncertain terms, and Saul found himself rejected by his own people. They could see God's hand in the situation. It was Saul who was blind. Jesus spoke of the folly of the spiritually blind trying to lead (Lk. 6:39-42).

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14:47-52

Before considering the long-term message of these seemingly uninteresting verses, we pause to consider the subject of guidance which was a prominent element in the previous passage. It is right and necessary to seek God's guidance before committing ourselves to decision and action. In Saul's case the Urim and Thummim were the somewhat mysterious method used in Israel to seek God's guidance. A Bible Dictionary will give more detail. The

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procedure had to do with supernatural guidance but we must keep in mind that a "supernatural" method should not be used if an ordinary method is available. But do not forget to pray. In our story an honest discussion between Saul and Jonathan, or a referring of the issue to Samuel, or an open consultation with representatives of the people would have made things quite clear. A significant part of discerning God's will is simply being sensible and discussing with the right people, people whose spiritual integrity is clear and who love us enough to be prepared to disagree with us even if in consequence they lose our friendship. When Saul first enquired of the Lord there was no answer and that was guidance to calm down, to think more clearly and to wait until God made the way plain. It was Saul who was in a hurry, not God. God is not in the business of confusing us so that He can punish us for going wrong. God is far more keen that we should do right than we are. And God will keep us right if we truly seek Him and wait on Him. Read Paul's story in Acts 16:6-10 and see there the continuing earnest prayer, the acceptance of frustration and the vetoing of plans, the absence of resentment or impatience, and finally the clear, joyful assurance of knowing they were in God's will.

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14:47-52

The work of God goes on and the confused, out-of-sorts, Saul was still in charge, at least on the human level. The work did not disintegrate. Battles were fought and victories were won and the powers of evil were increasingly put in their place. Does this mean Saul was still God's mighty man for the hour? No! He was already rejected (13:13-14). Although he continued to gather to himself a company of brave and competent men (52) and his exploits met with success (47), his days were numbered. But what of the men who gave their loyalty to Saul? Did they not see his basic self-will and his refusal to submit to God? Apparently not, and in due time these men were Saul's soldiers who harried and hunted David. They may have been taken in by the stir and excitement of Saul's victories, failing to see that God is not always on the side of the work that makes most noise. They may have been fascinated by Saul's tense, devouring personality, failing to see that the man was driven on by a desire for his own position and power rather than by a desire for the glory of God. Where was godly Samuel in all this? He seems to have been forgotten. After all, Israel had already told Samuel he was too old and not much use any more (8:4-5). But it is Samuel who appears in the next chapter as God's significant instrument. As for Saul, Israel was to suffer many things yet before they got rid of the man they had insisted on having as their king. God's changes often come slowly. But He can be astonishingly swift at other times. The times and seasons are in His own power (Acts 1:7) and He will neither be hurried nor delayed.

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15:1-9

We must deal carefully with solemn things. On a variety of levels history makes plain that the evil which nations do has long term consequences and in due time God brings righteous and appropriate judgment. An example from the Bible is how finally the long-term wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah was investigated by God and judged (Gen. 18:20, 21). In Matt. 23:29-36 Jesus spoke of a build up of past evil breaking in fullness on a particular generation. Here in Samuel we are faced with the long-term, deliberate and relentless opposition of the Amalekites down through the history of God's chosen people (Exod. 7:8-16; Deut. 25:17-19). In due time, when there has been no repentance or change of heart, judgment comes. Note that judgment is not indiscriminate. The Kenites had shown themselves to be different from the Amalekites, involved with them in the practical affairs of life but not really belonging to them. In the past the Kenites had shown kindness to God's people. God remembers the past in a variety of ways (Eccles. 3:15 AV and NIV; Heb. 6:9-10). Those who are of God and those who are not are both exposed by the fruit, activity and character of their lives (Matt. 7:15-23; 12:33-37). Judgment is inevitable and it is a solemn theme (Acts 17:31). But the amazing thing is not God's judgment of evil but His amazing patience and longsuffering of evil, so that even the worst may have opportunity to repent (2 Pet. 3:8-10). In judgment, as in punishment, the important thing to remember is that it is deserved; it is retribution, not deterrence or reformation. There is mystery in judgment but faith holds fast to the righteousness of God (Gen. 18:22-25). And, when facing

the ruthless cruelty and destructiveness of evil around us, we have the assurance that in the end evil cannot and will not prevail (Ps. 73:1-19). God will see to it (Rom. 12:19).

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15:1-9

The real application of this passage is a personal one in relation to Saul, because the day of his judgment had come. God spoke through Samuel, indicating that although the nation had refused his ministry Samuel was still God's spokesman. Saul is seen here as an instrument of God's judgment, not salvation, and this seemed to be the kind of work that appealed to the dark king. God had called Saul to a position of leadership, responsibility and privilege, but in the realm of service God's appointments are conditional on obedience and if that is not given, then no matter how openly successful in service, the man himself is rejected. We have already been told in 13:13-14 that Saul's house would not succeed to the throne, but the man personally still had hopes and possibilities. However, we see from this story that Saul had not learned from any of God's dealings with him. His own self-will asserted itself again and, seeing the possible personal profit from the quality items of booty, the command of God was forgotten. It is the story of incomplete obedience. The act of judgment was meant to be a demonstration of God's impeccable righteousness but what happened was something different. All the worthless booty was offered as a sacrifice to God; what was of value they kept for themselves. What an exposure of their true natures! What an exposure of their devaluation of God! But what of us? Do we not go our own way? Do we not often give the dregs of energy, time and affection to God after grasping the best for ourselves?

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15:10-23

As the story develops, note how emphatically it is stated that Samuel, not Saul, was the man with whom God spoke. Perhaps we have an example here of how God honours those who honour Him (1 Sam. 2:30). It is certainly clear from Scripture that God never treats His servants in a way that is shabby, unworthy or in any way that would devalue them. This does not mean Samuel was perfect. We have seen evidence of flaws earlier in the story and in this passage we are told of Samuel's radical reaction to God's message about Saul's rejection. The RSV says Samuel was angry (11) and cried to the Lord all night. But was he angry with God for rejecting Saul whom Samuel had ordained with public ceremony? Or was Samuel troubled about Saul for misusing his privileged position? Did he cry to God in prayer or did he weep with sorrow, frustration or exasperation? We cannot tell, but at least Samuel expressed his feelings to God honestly and that is better than pretending he could cope without difficulty. Samuel was troubled, possibly wondering what it all meant and what would happen if the throne became vacant. Of course the throne of God's work is never vacant and His kingdom has no end (Isa. 9:6-7; Ps.45:6). That is why Jesus gave the order to His disciples before their dark and perplexing hour, "Let not your hearts be troubled," (Jn. 14:1). The AV says Samuel was grieved, and the same word is translated in the story of Jonah, "It displeased Jonah." Clearly Samuel's mind was in a tumult of uncertainty and concern for the people he had ministered to for so long. It seems clear from 16:1 that Samuel's reaction was too radical, but in today's passage we find him the next morning composed and ready to do God's will, however unpleasant and costly.

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15:10-23

Whatever hopeful opinion or expectations Samuel had had about Saul, they must have been dashed early in the day when he was told of Saul having built a monument in his own honour. We are being shown increasingly how insensitive towards God this man had grown. He seemed to have had no twinge of conscience, no apprehension of the fact he was starting out on the most disastrous day of his life, no thought at all that God might be displeased with him. Saul's "holy" words of greeting to the prophet (13) must have saddened Samuel's heart. How can a man speak such spiritual words when his whole life is adrift from God? People can do it in conversation, in prayer meetings and from pulpits and it can all sound so dedicated. But if the heart and life are not yielded in obedience to

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God it is all mere words. Saul claimed to have carried out God's commission given in v.3 but Samuel immediately drew attention to the evidences of the situation (14). He did it in the form of a question, which gave Saul the opportunity to be honest and penitent but he immediately blamed the people, and did so later in v.24. At that point Samuel spoke, apparently with some real unction and authority (16), but Saul was not at all subdued. He was not of a mind to accept rebuke, nor even to accept that he had in any degree been in the wrong. Saul's words could perhaps be paraphrased: "Speak your mind, brother; share your burden with me, the king whom God appointed. All I want is to be God's man, and if you think I have been backsliding you are misjudging me." Saul may well have been thinking, "Samuel, you are the one the people rejected. I am in charge." How wrong he was!

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15:10-23

Samuel's address (17-23) sets the situation in its true perspective. In v.17 it seems strange Samuel suggests that Saul was little in his own eyes, although some sense of inferiority and insecurity may have lain behind his driving wilfulness. Of course, insecure people who are believers should remind themselves that God has chosen the weak things of the world to do His will (1 Cor. 1:26-29). If we really recognise our limitations we are at the point of being useful! The NIV rightly reads, "Although you were once small in your own eyes," referring back to 9:21, and reminding Saul of the great honour God had done him in making him king and entrusting holy service into his hands. Samuel's challenge was simple and direct: "Why did you disobey God?" Saul still protested his innocence and blamed the people for all that was wrong, but the earlier stories have made it plain that Saul was such a dominant character that the people would never have cast loose in this way without his permission and indeed his involvement. What Saul was doing here was saying that having done so many great things for God, surely no-one was going to "black-list" or disqualify him for something on a material level. He even seems to claim (21) that the people had taken all the best in order to sacrifice them once they got home to Gilgal. Samuel's words in v.22-23 we will ponder carefully tomorrow.

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15:10-23

On the Lord's Day we are called to worship God, sing praise, speak prayers and read the Bible. What will it all mean? Will it just be words? The last two verses of this passage and similar passages express God's attitude to worship that is not married to obedience (Isa. 1:12-17; Jer. 6:19-20; Ps.51:15-17). He will not accept easy, formal religion in place of a life of true discipleship. But today's words are very radical. Rebellion and stubbornness on the part of Saul put him on the same level as those who are heathen and darkened in mind and heart. There may not be the gross practices and incantations of those who invoke "spirits", although that came later in Saul's experience, but the principle of action is the same. They live their lives ignoring God's words and giving only that level of obedience they see fit, reserving the right to do what they want when they want. This refusal of God can remain hidden in a person's life for a long time, concealed often by a measure of religious practice, but it will come out into the open in due time. But, of course, God looks on the heart and He is not taken in by appearances. Saul's sins had found him out (Num. 32:23). He was told clearly and plainly that, because he had rejected God's word, God had rejected him from being king and from all that meant in terms of fruitful service. Remember what Jesus said to the chief priests of the Jews in Matt. 21:43. If people cannot be trusted with the stewardship of God's work, that work will be taken from them (1 Cor. 4:1-2). It is not just a matter of personal loss. A wrong life can conceal the Gospel and rob it of its power (1 Cor. 1:17; 2 Cor. 4:1-4).

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15:24-31

It is sad and sore to read of a man being rejected and removed from his place of service. It is also sad to see that Saul did not seem to have any real sense of the enormity and long-continued nature of his sin. He still made excuses, blaming the people but we must be careful in our criticism. It is so easy to keep silent in terms of

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testimony in order to please people or because we are afraid of their reaction and their possible rejection of us from "their crowd". Note that Saul pleaded for continuance of fellowship and service as well as for forgiveness (25) but that was not to be. There is sin that costs us our service as well as our reward. Let it be said plainly that our sins, even though they be scarlet, can be gloriously forgiven (Isa. 1:18). We are not speaking in these chapters about losing salvation but we must be clear that a believing man or woman can be disqualified from service, become a castaway (AV), laid aside as of no further use (1 Cor. 9:24-27). Think of Esau, who for self-satisfaction sold his spiritual birthright. We are told that later, when he wanted to be restored to his place in God's on-going work he found no place of repentance (Heb. 12:15-17). There were tears and distress with Esau as there were with Saul, but no change of heart. In v.26 Samuel's words indicate not simply the end of fellowship between the two men but a public testimony by their separation that Saul was no longer God's man. No one will ever know what it cost Samuel to speak these words and to repeat the solemn message when Saul held on to the prophet's robe as he walked away. It should make us think of Jesus' words to Judas in the Upper Room as that other dark man went out into the night (John 13:27-30).

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15:24-31

Samuel's use of the name "The Glory of Israel" for God is unique and gives us some indication of Samuel's concept of God. When God has spoken, the sentence is final. (Note, but do not be distracted by the fact that here it says God will not repent and in 15:10 it says God repented. The context indicates the meaning.) Saul's response in v.30 reveals a great deal about the man and his attitude. He asked that his rejection should be hidden from the public and especially from the elders of the people. It was his reputation he was concerned about. The facts of his sin and failure seemed secondary. It is open to question if Samuel did right in returning with Saul and engaging in worship together. Obviously Samuel had a regard and even affection for Saul, and his personal feeling may have clouded his spiritual judgment. Perhaps Samuel was being tempted to make excuses for Saul, feeling sorry for him, and perhaps even wondering in retrospect if God were being too hard. This is a legitimate speculation in view of God's rebuke to Samuel in 16:1. Samuel's confused and tangled feelings were proving a hindrance to the ongoing work of God. What complicated creatures we can be even when our deepest desire is to be true to God and to serve Him well and worthily. How needful it is for us to keep close to God so that no alien influences will be able to confuse and distract us. We need our minds and hearts fixed on God.

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15:32-35

Up to this point King Agag, leader of the anti-God Amalekites who had been spared by Saul, had been a free man assuming that once again he had gained the advantage over Israel. Summoned by Samuel he came with ingratiating words suggesting that the past could be forgotten and all would be friends together. Samuel left him in no doubt that his day of judgment had come. He would never again smite without mercy the people of God. Never forget to be on guard. The Devil can come in various forms and at times can be very plausible but his objective is always to harm as much as possible the people and work of God. We should often read Ephesians 6:10ff to remind us of the true nature of the battle we are involved in. The last two verses today give a summary of the situation as it now was. We should link v.26 with v.34-35 in order to see that from this point the activities of prophet and king were on totally different levels. There was no keeping up of appearances, no suggestion that they were still working together to do God's will, because they were motivated by different spirits. It will have been noticed by the general population that the two men were no longer in fellowship and, no doubt, different interpretations would have been put on the situation. Saul will have had his "popular" support from those who were attracted to and impressed by his human personality and drive, and they would very possibly regard Samuel as aloof, harsh in judgment and unforgiving. It is never easy for a faithful prophet to be true to God in times of crisis. Few will have given Samuel credit for grieving over Saul, but no spiritual leader finds any pleasure in people going astray. Remember that Jesus wept over the Jerusalem that was to crucify Him.

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16:1-5

We concentrate on the first two verses in order to see the humanity of Samuel, this servant of God whose spiritual stature is so impressive. The failure and the rejection of Saul, together with the fact that Saul's whole personality was beginning to disintegrate were a terrible grief to Samuel. It seems the prophet was longing to make contact with the king and finding the separation and detachment hard to cope with. But such separation is necessary for the good of the work as the New Testament teaches, eg. Rom.16:17; 2 Cor.11:12-15; Phil. 3:17-18; Titus 3:10-11. There is a gracious sternness in God's words to Samuel and the rebuke was necessary because Samuel had allowed himself to be so preoccupied with Saul's failure and the expected opposition to his own person and ministry that he was no longer thinking of God's on-going plans for the future. The truth was that God's successor to Saul was already marked out and Samuel was required to bring that plan of God into operation. But the prophet was still holding on to the past, still praying about it, still grieving over it and grieving too much. God had to tell Samuel to stop praying about Saul, to stop trying to hold on to him, to accept God's will in the situation and to go forward in faith. When we read in v.2 that Samuel was gripped with fear we must see this as a specific attack of the Devil. It was an irrational fear. Samuel had towered over the developing situation and had proved to be God's trusted man in a whole variety of situations, and to be virtually paralysed by fear in the face of a man so specifically rejected by God was a contradiction of his personality as well as his faith. We see the same fear in the story of the great prophet Elijah in. 1 Kings 19:1-4. We shall see in the story of David, in 1 Sam. 27: 1, the same irrational fear. How we need the command of God spoken so often in the Bible, "fear not". It is an order.

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16:1-5

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16:1-5

It is interesting to note that God not only spoke to Samuel, telling him what to do, but also told him how to do it. In spite of his fears, Samuel obeyed and when he came to Bethlehem he found the elders of the city were themselves afraid. This may have been partly due to the apprehension in the whole nation because of a sense that profound changes were about to take place. The elders may have been fearing the worst and, when there is not a clear awareness of God's presence and His hand on every development of circumstances, there can easily come a real

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feeling of dread which, of course, the Devil will accentuate. He will do anything to steal from us our rightful peace, given to us in Christ. (John 14:27) On the other hand the elders may have been awed by the manifest indications that God was mightily with His prophet Samuel (whom they had rejected) and they may not have been clear as to what this might signify for them. If they had bad consciences, for whatever reason, the coming of God's servant would have troubled them. What they did find was that they were invited to be witnesses of and sharers in what God was about to do. Jesse and his family were likewise called to worship and they came. Possibly none of the people present, except Samuel, had any awareness of what was going on nor any awareness of the spiritual significance of what was being worked out in their presence. This negative attitude can often mark our coming together for worship. Do we really expect to meet with God and to share in what He is doing? Little wonder we are counselled to draw near to God with true hearts and in the full assurance of faith (Heb. 10:22). One last thought: Samuel, who had been so full of fear, now carried the unction of God's authority in his person and actions. But possibly he was not aware of it. Consider Paul's words in 1 Cor. 2:1-5; 2 Cor. 12:7-10.

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16:6-13

Congregations looking for a new minister, missionary societies looking for candidates, and young people looking for a life's partner could benefit from this passage. It is so easy to be deceived by appearances and by first impressions, and we all tend to be influenced by what appeals on a human level. It seems in v.6-7 that Samuel was still thinking of a new king who would compare with Saul, someone of impressive appearance and personality (9:1-2). But God looks on the heart. Think of how the New Testament assesses men as being ready for service (Acts 6:3). Paul was unimpressive in appearance and in speech (2 Cor. 10:10) and he made plain that God does not choose many of the mighty, as the world measures might, but rather chooses the weak and those who are nothing in themselves (1 Cor.1:26-29). People who are too aware of their personality, gifts and position are not safe people to be entrusted with what belongs to God. One after the other Jesse made his sons pass before Samuel but each was rejected by God. Then, on the basis that God had already said that His choice had been made (v.1), Samuel asked the question in v.11. It is clear that Jesse had already discounted David and it is not hard here to see a foreshadowing of David's great Son, who was despised and devalued (Isa. 53:2-3). But David was the man after God's heart (Acts 13:22), marked out to be God's servant before he was ever aware of it. There is great encouragement here for all called to what is regarded as full-time service. We are marked and chosen people (Jer. 1:4-9). We may not be recognised nor called into position for a long time but our course is mapped out. And, what is very important, we are not sent to God's work in our own strength and capacity. Right from the start David was anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

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16:14-23

Yesterday's passage showed a man chosen by God, called and anointed for service with the power of the Holy Spirit. Today's passage is the complete opposite, for it tells of a man from whom the anointing and enabling of the Holy Spirit was withdrawn as a direct result of his wilful, sinful disobedience (15:24-26). The one thing that had made Saul of use to God was no longer there with him. The Spirit departed. We must not make this passage refer to a person's salvation, because that is not the theme. It concerns service, and should make us think of David's later earnest and anxious prayer that God should not take His Spirit from him (Ps. 51:10-13). We are taught in the New Testament that the Holy Spirit can be grieved (Eph. 4:30), resisted (Acts 7:51), and quenched (1 Thess. 5:19). We are taught also in all Scripture that there is forgiveness with God and restoration to service. If it were not so, none of us would be in Christ's service. But how often and to what extent can we count on this? We must never presume! Some say that David (whose story we are just starting to read) never again reached his true height of service after his great sins of adultery and murder regarding Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Sam.11). Paul spoke of the earnest discipline of his personality and life, lest the time should come that he be disqualified or laid aside as of no further use (1 Cor. 9:27). We cannot tell from the story to what extent Saul was aware of just how totally the Spirit

had abandoned him, but he certainly knew that all was not well, for he had no peace (14). At least Saul was tormented; in the case of Samson there was total complacency (Judges 16:20).

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16:14-23

It seems to have been evident to those nearest Saul that God's displeasure was the explanation of his agitation, anxiety and troubled spirit. The statement that the evil spirit was from God must be held in tension with the fact that God is never the author of evil (Jas. 1:13). God is sovereign, and yet men and women are allowed to choose and, having made the choice of disobedience, Saul placed himself outwith the protecting grace of God and he had to live with what he had chosen. But a man's heart does not remain empty and, having grieved away the Spirit of God, the way was left open for an evil spirit to take possession. We must not allow this lesson to terrorise us so that we jump to the conclusion that every time we sin we are in danger of ending up in this kind of dark bondage. We are dealing here with a man, blessed and used by God who, over a long period, went his own wilful way refusing every caution and advice given by godly Samuel. We must remember that the most important thing to know about the Devil is that he has been resoundingly conquered and defeated. That means that even in his most ferocious activity the Devil must serve the purposes of God and operate only within the limits God sets (Job 1:12; 2:6). Saul, who became increasingly a dark, brooding man rejected by God, still remained at the forefront of the ongoing life and work of God's people. If this perplexes us we should think of how Judas was chosen by Jesus to be one of the Twelve and how he operated in the inner circle of the disciples. And Jesus knew from the beginning that Judas was a devil (John 6:70). Evil was allowed for a clear and specific purpose. That thought should help us to cope with evil when we meet it, especially within the work and people of God.

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16:14-23

There are three fascinating matters to consider. First of all there is the fact of the attraction of Saul to David and the affection he felt for him, an evilly inspired man drawn to a good man. There seems to be something inconsistent and contradictory in the relationship but it may have been that there remained in Saul something that still recognised what his life might have been. There is something here to encourage us in our witness for Christ. If we are truly walking in fellowship and obedience there will be the power of attraction in us, and the life of Jesus within us by the Holy Spirit will draw needy people, just as it did in the Gospels (Matt. 15:29-30). The second thing is the influence that music played in the calming of Saul when evil troubled him. This does not mean that music in itself can work spiritual salvation, even though we may be deeply moved emotionally by it. But it does point to the importance of both music and song in the matter of worship. There is no doubt that congregational praise (participation rather than listening to others performing) is and should be a true means of grace, enabling us to express our worship, praise, longings and gratitude. But there is also music, sacred and secular, that does not have a beneficial effect but rather stirs and stimulates feelings and reactions that ought to be left dormant. In the secular realm there is music that can become the vehicle of carnal and demonic urges, manipulating both mind and emotions. We do well to be on guard. Think how God-directed the songs of the Psalmist are. Think of how repetitive some modern hymns and choruses are and of how a company of people can begin to sway to the music rather than bow to the truth. Think of how so many of the contemporary popular "hits" stir and lead to what is dark and devoid of God. We are in spiritual warfare. Read Eph. 6: 10-20.

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16:14-23

When we issued the original notes on Samuel in 1965 we quoted in connection with this passage these words from the Book "Dogmatics" by the theologian Emil Brunner. They come from the chapter entitled, "Angels, Spirits, and the Devil".

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"The Satanic element in human experience is not the instinctive animal instinct, greatly intensified, but it is evil with a numinous halo: not evil which repels, but evil which fascinates and allures by the magic of its attraction. We should look for traces of real devilry rather in the sphere of literature and art than in the criminal world. The Devil does not care very much for what is low and insignificant, he prefers what is high and exalted."

That deserves much thought. So also does the fact that here we see David, the anointed of God, significant for the future development of the work of God, being moved into the very presence of the evil man who was to prove such a devilish opponent of both David and the work of God. Of course, we saw a similar situation when the child Samuel, destined to be the saviour of the nation, was entrusted to the care of old Eli in the midst of corrupt, degenerate and unprincipled religion (1 Sam. 1:26-28; 2:11,12). One lesson is that God is never afraid of evil and another is that God always takes the initiative, acting before any of us are aware that He is planning significant developments. A further lesson lies in the fact that David's presence in the camp and court of Saul, and Saul's progressive hatred and persecution of him, were the very things that exposed beyond any shadow of doubt that Saul was a man of evil and deserving of judgment. We must never underestimate what we are involved in nor what God is actively and deliberately doing.

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17:1-11

The story of David and Goliath appeals on a variety of levels and teaches many spiritual lessons. It is the story of how the great bully who threatened and terrified Israel was easily, swiftly and permanently dealt with by the young hero who appeared on the scene, largely unknown and certainly unappreciated. It is clear from v.8b-9 that what was needed was one man to be the representative of all the people of God, to fight and to conquer on their behalf. The victory of the Representative, and all the benefits of that victory, would be reckoned as belonging to the people. We must see here something that points forward to God's Representative man who came as a second Adam to the fight and to the rescue. Think of Luther's great hymn, "A safe stronghold" - "But for us fights the proper man, whom God Himself hath bidden." By the end of our study of this story we should be rejoicing in faith and saying, "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor.15:57) But we are going too fast. We must recognise that the end of Chapter 16 (v.19-23) follows the pattern, of the Old Testament historian and gives a summary of what happens in the next phase of the story. It is clear from 17:55-58 that prior to the fight with Goliath Saul did not know and had no contact with David. Now, note the context of the whole story. We are told that the Philistines gathered their forces for battle and we must remind ourselves of the persistence and resilience of the enemy. In spite of earlier significant defeats the enemy comes again and again. The Devil never gives up. We are reminded of the story of Jesus' temptation by the Devil. When Satan had done his worst on every possible level and had been resisted, he departed from Jesus until an opportune time (Lk. 4:13). Satan broke off the confrontation "biding his time" (NEB), "for a season" (AV), "until the next opportunity" (JBP). Be quit clear about this. The Devil will be back. Make it your business to watch and pray.

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17:1-11

The people and the work of God will always be resisted and opposed by the Devil in some way or another, and at times the enemy will be particularly angry and vicious because he knows his time is limited (Rev. 12:12). Here in our story the work of God is moving forward to a new stage of development and it is not surprising that the enemy attacks. We see the Devil here as a roaring lion, presenting himself as mighty in word and power, with not the slightest thought of the possibility of defeat. The result was an all-embracing feeling of fear and dismay among God's people. Some of the demoralisation of the army of Israel may have come from the fact that the people were perplexed by the manifest disturbance of the mind and spirit of Saul, their leader. This is a great challenge to all who are in places of leadership among God's people. If the leaders lose their vision, or their confidence in God, and their relationship with God is not what should be, they will be a hindrance to their people. Of course, the

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appearance of Goliath was terrifying, but must not live and work as Christians on the basis of what is seen or what seems to be (2 Cor. 4:18). The truth of the matter (as the story goes on to make plain in the collapse of Goliath) is that the powers of evil, far from being mighty and strong, are in fact weak because they have been disarmed by the victory of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, great David's greater son (Col. 2:15). In terms of "armaments", Goliath was far stronger than anything Israel could muster, even if Israel had had the courage to muster at all. But the weapons of our warfare are not carnal or fleshly (2 Cor. 10:3-4). We fight the good fight of faith (1 Tim. 6:12). Resist the Devil and he will flee (Jas. 4:7). When he comes with all his threats to rob you of peace and to undermine you as you face the challenge of service, place the mighty Jesus between yourself and the enemy and remind yourself of facts not appearances. The victory is won, and is given to us in Christ.

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17:12-30

For forty days Goliath terrorised Israel with his loud, boastful challenge and no-one was prepared to stand against him. David, the man who was to prove the significant key to the situation, was nowhere to be seen, having been considered too young or too inexperienced to go to battle. The process by which God moved his appointed servant to where he was needed was an amazingly simple one. From tending the sheep he was sent to take food to his brothers and to their captain. It did not seem to be an errand that was going to change the whole course of events. The statement in v.19 that Israel was fighting with the Philistines is something of an exaggeration because no-one was taking up the challenge. The attitude seems to have been, "It's no use. It can't be done." There seems to have been a token "demonstration" (20-21) perhaps in terms of playing for time, perhaps even hoping the enemy might just go away. The reaction of David to the roaring of Goliath is wonderfully expressed in v.24-27. The young man felt this whole situation was an affront to God. It was! And the craven weakness of the men of Israel was likewise an affront to God. It always is an affront to God when a glaring spiritual need is present and no-one from the army of faith is ready or willing to tackle it. True to human nature, even Christian human nature, the faith of David was resented by his brothers (28-30). Of course, the spontaneous reaction of David highlighted the lack of willing response on the part of the brothers. Perhaps they were thinking back to the event of David's anointing by Samuel and how they had been passed over (16:6-13). There is a similar story in Gen. 37:5-11 where Joseph's brash talking about his spiritual calling angered his brothers and led to a long series of complications. But in both David's and Joseph's stories there is a great emphasis on the sureness of God's over-ruling providence (Gen. 50:20). Do we really believe that God is always at work arranging circumstances and setting His people in their appointed places for service?

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17:31-40

In v.29 David's reply to his brothers may indicate that he had always been looked down on by them. It seems the other people were more prepared to listen to him, and the news of this young confident man was passed on to Saul. Again, we must see the hand of God ordering the situation. If some people (the brothers) will neither recognise God's man nor be used to do God's will, then God will simply find others. There is something artless about David's testimony to the king but at the same time there is a clear recognition that Goliath must not be invested with either value or power. Those who stand against the work of God must be seen for what they are, "uncircumcised in heart" (26), having no place with God. David is quite clear that it is God, not Saul nor the men of Israel, who is the offended party. His confidence may have been regarded as precocious but events proved that it stemmed from faith and from the power of Holy Spirit (16:13). There is no indication here that David was consciously acting as the Lord's anointed. He was simply approaching the situation on the basis of faith, which faith seems to have been the foundation of his whole life in the ordinary, daily routine of a shepherd. He had proved God in his life, lived away from the glare of publicity, and that was why he was found totally ready for crisis when it came. Emergency preparation should not be necessary. That is the lesson from Daniel's walk with God and his consistent devotional life (Dan. 6:10). The lesson of v.38-40 is simply that we cannot go to spiritual battle with another person's faith and

trust. We must prove God for ourselves and in the way that is natural to our personalities and situations. It was the shepherd's equipment of a sling and stones which had been much used in practice that David relied on. We should never try to be what we are not, nor try to do what is not given to us to do.

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17:41-49

Picture the scene with both armies drawn up to witness the contest on which so much depended. Goliath made his contempt for David very obvious and it may well have been that many in Israel were of like mind, feeling that the battle was as good as lost. If David was aware of the defeatist attitude in Israel it would have been a burden to him, making him feel more than ever totally alone, but for the presence of God with him. Looking back to v.37 it is interesting to note that it was Saul, now very much a non-spiritual man, who was the only one who spoke a word of encouragement to David. Many a man has gone forward to spiritual battle without the expressed support of those who should have been the first to encourage. Think of how Jesus' three closest friends left Him to "go it alone" in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26: 36-45). We must not think of David being without any sense of fear in a diabolical confrontation like this. Courage is not the absence of fear, but resolute action in spite of fear. David's faith is so wonderfully expressed in v.45-48 that we are reluctant to try to expound it in detail. David was sure of his God, sure that he was doing God's will, sure of the outcome, and totally sure that the glory and praise belonged to God alone and would go to God. David was not concerned to make a name for himself, and that, in a young man, was a sure indication that he had a future of service ahead of him. It is encouraging indeed when we can see in our congregations young men and women showing signs of having the kind of faith and commitment that has a "long-term" feel about it.

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17:41-49

There was an important lesson for Israel to learn and it is time that the church in our own day learned it. It is stated in v.47. It is all too easy for the church to try to use methods and techniques that are essentially worldly to do spiritual work. All too often we hear so-called church leaders saying, "Society thinks; society expects; the attitudes and standards other professions allow," and on that basis seek to adjust and adapt not only the church's methods but even the church's message in the hope that the world will listen and respond. But just as Goliath despised David's attitude, approach and weapons, so the world despises the church when it so manifestly compromises. It is with the Gospel of salvation and with confidence in the living Word of God that we address the world in its need. The application of the Gospel to social needs must not be confused with the truth of the Gospel. And when the application takes precedence over the preaching of the Gospel it is only a matter of time before the message becomes one which is little different from humanism. We do well to remember both Paul's warning that cleverness of method can in fact rob the Gospel of its power, and also his example that, in the face of broken-down, corrupt society, he determined to preach nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 1:17; 2:1-5). We have emphasised already that we do not fight with worldly weapons (2 Cor. 10:4) and we need constant reminders that we are engaged in spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:10ff). We see in our passage that the end of Goliath was swift and decisive. But we must also see that David's use of his weapon was not miraculous, but the result of long practice. He worked at it. In Ephesians 6:17-18 we are reminded of the weapons of the Word of God and Prayer. How well used are these weapons?

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17:50-54

We see here the outworking of the victory won by David as the "representative" of all the people. It was not simply a personal victory, although we must not deny him credit for it; nor was it a victory won in his own strength, as David himself made plain at the beginning (45-47). The victory was God's doing, but it is to be hoped that the people recognised the debt they owed to the human instrument used by God, the man who was willing and able

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when no one else was. This principle of a representative overcoming the enemy and freeing the people from bondage is Paul's theme in Romans 5:12,15-19, 21;1 Cor.15:21-22. The human race, headed up in Adam, lost the battle in the Garden of Eden and ended up in total bondage. Christ, the second or last Adam, came to the fight and rescue, won the battle over sin and Satan, and sets free those who believe in Him. But the victory has to be claimed and acted on, and this is what we see in today's verses. The victory having been won, the men of Israel and Judah rejoiced, took their stand in David's victory and routed the whole army of the Philistines. This is what we must do as we face the enemies: sin, self and Satan. We do not struggle on, hoping for victory. We stand in the victory that Christ has won, and from the place of victory and in the power of that victory which is within us by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:18-20) we go forward to claim for ourselves what Christ has won for us. The danger always is that, in the thrill and satisfaction of victory, we begin to think we have done it all our selves. But as soon as we begin to lose our sense of dependence on the Lord we are in danger of the subtle inroads of pride and complacency which grieve the Spirit and slowly but surely stifle spiritual worship and fruitful service. All we are, all we have, and all we ever accomplish comes from God alone.

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17:55-18:5

The beginning of the Book of Samuel told of a child destined to be the significant prophet in Israel, kept safe, trained and prepared in the context of a decadent religious system. In due time he took his place and his ministry began. In the same way David was destined to be king, anointed by Samuel, trained by life's experiences to be both shepherd and soldier. He emerged from obscurity and, as the result of the victory over Goliath, he was established in the court of Saul. His future significant service was about to begin, and he was given a friend, Jonathan, whose love and loyalty were to prove of immense value. Such friendships are a gift from God and here it seems the initiative came from Jonathan. It was a friendship that was neither obsessive nor possessive but there was a true sharing on a human level, all set in the context of the call to God's service. The test of all relationships is to what extent they make us truer to God and more available to God. But there must be open-ness and honesty and sharing. We may take all that a friend can give, and be truly grateful for it, but if we maintain a non-giving attitude that does not open up honestly, then the friendship will be inhibited and lose its value and potential both humanly and spiritually. Proverbs 17:17; 18:24; 27:6 are verses worthy of meditation. But consider now David's position which was one of three-fold danger. He was in the forefront of public attention, at the peak of public popularity, and at the heart of the court of Saul, a man who was becoming increasingly an instrument of the Devil. Perhaps it was Jonathan's awareness of the danger to and the demands on David, rather than just his admiration for him that led to the valued friendship. Perhaps Jonathan saw what many Christians fail to see, the true cost of being "out front".

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18:6-9

The anger of Saul stemmed from jealousy, well described as "the green eyed monster". There is cruelty, bitterness and ruthlessness in jealousy, especially in the context of the work of God when someone feels he or she is being "side-lined" and no longer considered "significant". It can take time before this dark, evil spirit becomes evident but there is usually a history behind it that can be traced. As far back as 14:1-2, 6-7, 12 Jonathan is seen as a man of faith and courage whose ventures the Lord blessed. Then in 14:43-46 Saul's hasty judgment is frustrated by the admiration the people had for his son. Then Jonathan showed a generosity of love and loyalty to David (18:3-4) and now the enthusiasm of the people for David's victories is expressed in terms of comparison which showed Saul in a bad light. The king felt threatened and there is something ominous in v.9. The women with their songs and dances never meant to do harm to David nor to put him under pressure and in danger, but that is exactly what their enthusiasm did. We must not forget the Devil, who is always seeking opportunity to introduce confusion and hindrance to the work of God. He got his opportunity in this celebration of victory. Of course, if the people had not in any way expressed their rejoicing and gratitude, that could have been a hurt and grief to David, and again the Devil would have got in. Perhaps there was too much human adulation from the women who were too aware of

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David's attractiveness. That can happen and we can regard someone as very spiritual, not because they are, but simply because we happen to like them. We must be wise and careful. It is not for nothing that we sing of Satan waiting for our unguarded hours. We must be careful lest we create situations which prove to be dangerous stumbling blocks to those we love and who are vitally engaged in God's work (I Cor. 8:13; Rom. 14:21).

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18:10-15

It is interesting that both AV and NIV say that Saul "prophesied" but RSV says he "raved". It is clear that the source of Saul's ecstatic utterance and behaviour was the evil spirit that came upon him and we may be meant here to recognise just how clever the Devil is at producing counterfeit manifestations of "spiritual" things (2 Cor. 11:14). The statement that the evil spirit was from God is difficult to understand and some comment was made on this matter in the note on 16:14-23. The emphasis seems to be that what Saul was experiencing "was not merely an inward feeling of depression at the rejection announced to him, which grew into melancholy, and occasionally broke out into fits of insanity, but a higher evil power, which took possession of him, and not only deprived him of his peace of mind, but stirred up the feelings, ideas, imagination, and thoughts of his soul to such an extent that it drove him to madness." (Delitzsch) That the evil spirit is spoken of as "from God" may indicate that it was by way of punishment. We cannot tell to what extent Saul was aware that the "spirit" motivating him was evil and not good, but it is clear he yielded to it, perhaps even encouraged it, and certainly did not say, "Get behind me, Satan". The nature of the spirit that impelled Saul is clear from the actions produced. Saul may have thrown the spear twice on two different occasions or he may have threatened to throw it and, when David skipped out of the way, actually threw it with clear intent to murder. It is not difficult to imagine the sense of tension, danger and even fear this produced in David. This highlights one of the Devil's favourite ploys: to destroy our peace. By contrast, God is the God of peace (Heb. 13:20; Rom. 15:33; 16:20). What we must grasp is that even the operations of evil are "from" God in the sense that evil is never free to operate independently of God. What a comfort.

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18:10-16

It is interesting and significant to note that it was Saul who ended up being afraid not David. It is also significant that Saul seems to have been, in measure at least, aware that God was with David and was not with him. Now, since Saul had at one time been aware of God being with him in a significant way, and being aware that God was not with him any more, it is little wonder he was afraid. Think of Paul's words in 1 Cor. 9: 24-27 about being disqualified from further service, and David's words in Ps. 51:11, pleading from the heart that God would not take His Spirit from him in terms of service. Saul gave David a position that made sure he would be out of his presence and also in danger from active military service. Perhaps David was aware that Saul felt this was a good way to get rid of a man who was an embarrassment and, of course, later in his life David employed a similar method (2 Sam. 11:14-17). Saul's plan did not work because God was over-ruling in David's life. We need to note that the references to David's "success" (5,14,15) could read that "David behaved himself wisely". There was a balance, a wisdom, a grace about his person and behaviour that spoke clearly of the good and gracious Spirit of God that was on him. We have a similar instance in Acts 4:33 where it is said that "much grace was upon them all." At this stage in his life, even though under great pressure and provocation, David seems to have made it his business to do nothing that would complicate or hinder God's ways with Him and God's plans for his future service. It is clear that David could easily have started a popular movement of criticism of and disaffection from Saul but he did not do so. He waited on God. When we are walking with God and know it to be so we have no need to manipulate people or circumstances. Our times are in God's hand (Ps. 31:15).

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18:17-19

Three verses are enough today because we must trace the corruption, deterioration and evil of Saul's personality, attitudes and actions. The list provides a devastating mirror in which we may well see ourselves as we really are or as we are becoming. In v.8 resentment, v.9 jealousy, v.10 appearance of intense spirituality, v.10 outburst of temper, v.12 fear, v.13 retaliation, v.15 more fear, v.17 deceit, v.21 deceit, v.29 still more fear. What we see is a man becoming more and more slave to his own fallen and disordered personality, and this was the result of his own wilfulness and disobedience which caused the Spirit of God to depart from him (16:14). It is good to be reminded of this and to be made aware of how much, how often and to what great extent we are guarded and kept by the gracious providences of God without our ever being aware of it. It is by the grace of God alone that we are what we are and have reached the stage we are at and we must never forget it (1 Cor. 15:10). It will keep us from pride, self-confidence and from complacency (1 Cor. 4:7); the latter being one of the sins that can so easily beset and snare those who have sat long under God's good Word, enjoying His blessing, but failing to maintain a wide-awake obedience and willingness to serve. Think of how Paul, who had done so much in his ministry, spoke so sadly and painfully of some who had done him harm and others who had forsaken him, having loved this present world (2 Tim. 4:9-15). We can love the Christian "world" with its happy companionship to the extent that service becomes secondary, unless it is the kind of service we like and are attracted to. These are solemn and searching thoughts but they are truly biblical as Rev. 2:1-5; 3:1-3,15-22 make plain. Saul was a man removed from his place.

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18:17-19

In the list yesterday we did not mention deliberate duplicity but we have it here so clearly. It was public knowledge that the king's daughter had been promised in marriage to the conqueror of Goliath (17:25) but after a long time it still had not been done. Now the promise is renewed along with an appeal, which David could not refuse, that he should go and fight the Lord's battles. Saul was again being very spiritual, suggesting that the Lord's battles took priority over the king's wish to marry off his daughter. David seems to have kept his part of the bargain but was faced then with public insult and gross contempt when the girl was given to another man. That must have hurt. Deliberate humiliation is a devilish thing and there would have been great public and popular support for David if he had reacted by denouncing the king and making a bid for the throne. But faith does not react to the stings of the Devil. Faith stands, keeps calm and cool, and commits its cause to God who is fully aware of all that is happening. In the New Testament we are given the example of "great David's greater Son" who when He was reviled, reviled not in return (1 Pet 2:20-23). Peter goes on to counsel believers to humble themselves under God's mighty hand and for good reason (1 Pet. 5:5-11). Paul, in his life of service, learned and counselled the same lesson (1 Cor. 4:9-13). After all, Jesus had made plain that there is blessing in being reviled, devalued and persecuted (Matt. 5:9-12). David might well have said (as we say, but not always with true faith) "God knows!" Indeed He does, and in all things, even when men mean them for evil, God works for good (Rom. 8:28; Gen. 50:20). David's story does not stop, but there may well have been some real delay between v.19 and 20. Hurt feelings do not subside quickly, even when we yield to God's will. We are human, and God remembers that (Ps. 103:14).

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18:20-30

It may well have been David's gracious, humble but manly bearing in his time of public shame and hurt that caused Michal to fall in love with him. After all, a man is most manly and most attractive when he is walking with God in willing obedience. A man like that can be trusted safely by a woman and she can expect him to love her with the kind of love God calls a man to give (Eph. 5:21-33). When Saul heard of his daughter's love for David it pleased him on two counts. It gave him the opportunity to regain popular favour by giving David his daughter and so to claim he had kept his promise, perhaps saying the other marriage had been decided hastily. It also gave Saul the opportunity to ensnare David yet again and hopefully get rid of him, or at least to reduce his reputation. In v.22 we see the deceiver again at work. David's words in v.23 show him to be basically a humble man who did not seek

place and position for himself. In v.25 the king makes himself out to be generous in the extreme, fully understanding of David's humble shepherd background, and waiving his right to ask a substantial dowry to seal the marriage. The challenge, which called for hand to hand combat with the Philistines, was given, accepted and carried out within the set time. The marriage took place, and if it had not there would have been public outcry. The summary in v.28-29 is very revealing. It is clear that God was with David. The people loved David (RSV). Michal, the king's daughter, loved David, and she would not be an ally to her father in his ongoing enmity. In many ways this was the hardest time of David's life but he stood firm and went on in God's good will, proving God again and again (30). It was later, when the pressures eased and the work was established, that David fell. Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:12).

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19:1

Saul's murderous hatred of David and his deliberate intention to kill him now come right out into the open. It was no longer a subtle scheme to "arrange" for David to be killed in warfare but a clear statement of purpose in which Saul tried to enlist his son as well as his servants. Note how Saul assumed that others would agree with him. Such is the arrogance and blindness of evil. Try to imagine David's feelings and reactions as he was made so constantly aware of this evil directed against him. It was more than just human jealousy and resentment. It was devilish, and all who are engaged in spiritual service must remind themselves that the battle is not against mere flesh and blood human nature. We must see clearly the context and nature of the warfare we are engaged in. Four things are clear: a world order of evil (1 John 2:16-17; 5:19); a spirit of disobedience in fallen human nature (Eph. 2:2); an organised kingdom of evil with well laid plans and stratagems (Eph. 6:10ff); and an angry Devil whose enmity is constant and whose fury bursts out from time to time (Rev. 12:12; 1 Pet. 5:8). These elements in Christian service are always there, sometimes latent, hidden, often unrecognised, but very active. This devilish element has to be recognised if we are to understand Saul's obsessive enmity towards David. It cannot be explained merely in terms of a man's dark and disordered psychology, nor his disintegrating personality, although these factors often have to be recognised and allowed for. Not all issues are exclusively spiritual. Apart from faith in the sure and sovereign purposes of God we could be sorely perplexed by the extent to which God allows evil to go on operating. But, as the story of Judas at the heart of the disciple band, and the story of the Tares and Wheat (Matt. 13:24-30) both show not even the full operation of evil can prevent the perfect harvest of God's purposes. Indeed, evil must serve God, but its way of doing so exposes beyond any doubt the necessity of judgment.

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19:1-7

Note the total contrast between v.1 and 7: murderous intention in the former and friendly acceptance in the latter. It may signify that Saul liked David as a man, for he was attractive, pleasant, useful and a good soldier of the king, but as God's servant, on whom God's future work centred, Saul hated him. Note the progress of the story. In the context of devilish opposition and spiritual warfare David and Jonathan found wonderful fellowship that was human as well as spiritual. Jonathan was alive to the danger and made it his business to counsel David, assuring him of total support. Jonathan's intercession with his father would have been equally effective without saying anything to David but, of course, David would not have had the human encouragement. We all make this mistake at times. We feel we have done all that is necessary when we have prayed for our friends, praying with earnestness and with love. But the human words to the person in need are sometimes vital. The spiritual and the human go together, and what God has joined we have no right to put asunder. In the face of the human enemy and bitter critic, Jonathan made plain that his heart lay with David, and then went on to intercede on the basis of facts (4-5). Not only had David not sinned against Saul, Saul owed him a debt of gratitude. This too we often forget, and in so doing we grieve God. When someone under God has been the means of our blessing, protection, comfort, encouragement, safety and rescue, there is a debt of gratitude that cannot be paid merely in words, whether spoken

to man or to God. Note how often the name Jonathan occurs in this passage. He never became the public figure David was, but his service was significant.

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19:8-10

Keep in mind what we have said about spiritual and then link together v.6-7 and v.9-10. There is no doubt that going forward in spiritual service draws the attention and the merciless fury of the Devil. Of course we must recognise that not all conflict is the result of obedience to God. When we backslide we remove ourselves in measure from the protection of God and our lives are exposed to the attacks of the evil one. Sometimes the outbursts of evil are "the trial of our faith" (1 Pet. 1:6-7) and sometimes, as in the case of Job, it is all part of the mystery of God's working on a higher plane than mere human experience. We must not interpret all that happens to us simply in terms of our own personal experience. For example, in Col. 1:24 Paul speaks of his sufferings being in measure for the blessing of the Colossians whom he had never visited. Some of what happens to us will not be clear to us until we get to Heaven and then we will "bless the hand that guided, and bless the heart that planned." We must note, of course, that Saul was not alone or single-handed in his venom against David, as the next passage makes plain. We could go to Psalm 59:1-4, 6, 14 and sense some of David's feelings when all this was going on. Think of the endless pressure and tension, never sure what was going to happen next. In today's verses it almost seems as if Saul is beguiling David into a false sense of security. The whole situation seems so peaceful, a musical evening in the king's court. But, from his earlier training as a shepherd, David would almost instinctively note the details of the situation. He would be aware that Saul had his spear in his hand. It is sometimes a very small thing that warns us that a situation, or a person's attitude or speech is not as innocent as it seems. David knew quite a bit about deceit, even among those who claimed to be friends (Ps. 55:20-22). He also knew what to do.

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19:11-17

Michal loved David, and there is some real evidence of it here. Love is more than attraction and different from fascination. Michal was certainly quick to support and protect her husband, and in that she was a true partner. It is easy to criticise and even condemn her for her scheme of deception, but when an innocent man's life is in danger "camouflage" is surely permitted, especially in view of the murderous hatred of Saul that demanded a sick man to be brought on his bed to be killed off. It would have been a truer sign of love if Michal had answered her father honestly, because her lie cast a shadow on the character of David, giving Saul a further open excuse for pursuing him. After all, a father must act when his daughter has been threatened. But a more revealing fact about Michal, and about David's home life, is seen in the fact that there was an image or idol in the home. This seems to signify that David and Michal were not truly united in the matter of spiritual life and service, and this becomes clearer later in the story in 2 Samuel 6:16-23. It may well have been that early in the marriage Michal was jealous of her husband's love for and commitment to God and His service. True love will not be like this, but will rather make a wife want to be a true "helpmeet", encouraging and enabling her husband to be all he should be and is capable of being for the Lord. This is a good test of relationships of all kinds. Do they sharpen our spiritual perception and commitment or do they have a dulling effect? It is both perplexing and sad to watch people over a spell of years and to see a slow but sure quenching of spiritual desire and appetite. We do well to examine our relationships to see where they are leading us. If we are not sure, and really want to be right with God, we could ask someone who can be trusted to speak honestly.

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19:18-24

We concentrate today on the first verse which reminds us that in the developing of the story we have virtually forgotten about Samuel, simply because he is not obviously involved in the action. We need to remember Samuel was a man of prayer and he had covenanted long ago never to stop praying for his people (12:23). There is an

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important lesson here. When we promise to pray for those called and sent out to God's work we are under obligation to God and to the people to be faithful in prayer. Especially in the prayer life of a congregation we must recognise that these "responsibility" intercessions take priority over other more immediate and more "interesting" requests for prayer. We must not allow the prayers that should be prayed at home (because they are prayers to do with our own personal circle of friends and acquaintances) to supplant those prayers that are the immediate business of the congregation at prayer. We can be selfish and self-centred in our prayer lives just as in other areas of life. It is interesting that in danger and, perhaps concerned about his marriage, David knew who to go to. He went to the dependable man of prayer and shared his burden. It is right to "take it to the Lord in prayer", but it is not necessary nor right to try to be independent of those whom God has given us, people proved to be trustworthy men and women over many years. It is interesting and significant that David and Samuel went to Naioth and stayed there. The prophet knew full well that after the costly experiences of life what David needed perhaps more than anything else was a time of restful and refreshing fellowship. All too often the Devil makes Christians feel so guilty about taking time off to do nothing that they go on and on until exhaustion takes over and that can lead to desolation (1 Kings 19:3-4).

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19:18-24

Take a broader view of this passage and see how Samuel was not only an intercessor but a man preparing for the future of God's work by supervising and teaching the schools of the prophets. All of us must begin to see how important this is. There has to be the training and preparing of people who will be ready for God when the time comes. Some may have criticised Samuel for leaving David to "go it alone" but this does not fit the facts. David's whole work was undergirded by Samuel's prayers and in some ways David was more able to be in the front line than the young trainee prophets. But all were part of the work and Samuel was the anchor man. Of course, it takes great grace to be the prayer warrior because you are always out of sight and therefore misunderstood and accused of doing nothing. Some who read these words must take them as a specific call from God to pray for those who are at an early stage in their ministries and also those being called to the ministry. Too often, after the thrill of commissioning services and the like, and the first encouraging reports from the new work, these ministers, slogging on in hard and costly places, tend to be forgotten. We must never become so preoccupied with our own present situation that we forget the future development of and provision for what God is doing elsewhere. Do not fail to notice that right through this passage there are indications of the continuing enmity and opposition of Saul. Even in his time of necessary rest David was the target for the Devil. Note also how clearly we are shown that a company of praying people dealing with the Word of God is a mighty instrument to subdue, frustrate and overcome the efforts of evil.

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19:18-24

The whole of this fascinating gathering was controlled by the power of the Holy Spirit. The important thing to emphasise is not the prophesying and the apparent ecstasy that accompanied it, because Saul's messengers and then Saul himself were caught up into the experience. It seems that in some ways Saul excelled the others in the extravagance of his "spirit-controlled" experience (24) to the extent that some people wondered if he had had an authentic experience of God by the Holy Spirit. But Saul was not changed in any way. He remained the dark, deliberate opposer of God's man and God's work. He, and anyone else, may speak with the tongues of men and angels but if there is no love for God and man then the tongues are nothing but a harsh, clanging noise (1 Cor. 13:1-3). What we have to see is the sovereign protection of God by His Holy Spirit over the people and work of God as it faced devilish danger. Think of David's words in Ps. 21:11 and Ps. 2:2-4. Those who would raise hands and voices against God's work have God to deal with. But on a brighter note, think again of the effect of the gathered company around Samuel, because it was when the messengers came in contact with that group at worship that they came under the influence of the power of God (20). God dwells among His people and those who come

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near become aware of it. That is one reason why we must come to God's House for worship with minds and hearts prepared. There is to be a meeting with God Himself, and who knows what other people will be there? A congregation of believing people at worship lays constraint on unbelievers who come in. A congregation singing praise from the heart can move unbelievers to be aware of the reality of God. A congregation drawing near to God in reverent prayer can bring unbelievers into God's presence. But not one of these reactions necessarily means unbelievers have come to faith. There has to be the response of a yielding of life, and neither Saul nor his servants showed that kind of response. Their "spiritual" experience was not unto salvation.

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20:1-4

If this chapter follows on in strict time sequence after the previous one it is difficult to see why David fled. If the incident at Naioth showed the sovereign, restraining power of God by the Spirit, why did David not wait on in company with Samuel to see how things developed and to see if there was any sign of change in Saul? Perhaps Samuel realised David was expecting a total change in the king and counselled him to go away. Perhaps David was perplexed as to how Saul could act and speak like a prophet when he had so recently been determined to kill him. Perhaps, as at other times, David was simply giving way to a tendency to panic (27:1). David may have felt that God had placed him in Saul's court and that he ought to be there in spite of all the danger and cost. On the other hand, it may have been that David was taking the opportunity to consult with his friend Jonathan while Saul was delayed at Naioth. As the chapter goes on it is clear Saul was back at court (5) and what we have in this initial conversation is a revelation of David's agitated condition and his feeling that he was in extreme danger. He had a great sense of injustice, feeling that Saul's spasmodic attempts on his life were quite unwarranted. Jonathan was far more optimistic, sure that he was in a position to warn David of any real danger. To what extent these men saw clearly the plans and purposes of God we cannot say, but David, anointed by Samuel, must have had some sense of divine call and destiny. He struggled with perplexity because of all the grim things happening to him. David would yet learn how God prepares a table of rest and refreshing in the presence of enemies (Ps. 23:5); how a man of faith can be still because God is his refuge (Ps. 46:1-3, 10-11). But it is out of the presses of pain that the soul's best wine comes.

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20:5-11

David was very aware of injustice (1) and fear (3), more aware of these than of God and as a result this scheme involving lies was set in motion. We do not minimise or devalue the immense and wonderful love and loyalty between these two men, nor do we suggest there was any impropriety or imbalance in the relationship. It was a God-given friendship and we have to see Jonathan set in his place by God in order to be a friend, support and helper to David. God always knows what He is doing and He places His servants strategically. That being so, God's servants have a spiritual duty to be in their appointed places. Daniel in the court of Babylon (Dan. 6:1-3), Nehemiah, servant to Cyrus (Neh. 2:1), Moses trained in leadership by the court of Pharaoh (Exod. 2:10), and Joseph, Prime Minister of Egypt (Gen. 41:41), are all examples of what we may call God's efficiency. But when even men of faith forget God there is a tendency to resort to human schemes. "O what a tangled web we weave, when first we practise to deceive" (Scott). Of course, not being in the actual situation, it is easy to criticise. Have we never acted foolishly when exercised about guidance and about how to handle a situation? Here we simply read the passage, see its elements, sense its perplexities and follow on to learn its developments, always remembering that Satan waits for our unguarded hours. We do well to refer to the story of Daniel facing another evil-inspired king and see there first, how Daniel did not need to adjust his prayer life to face the crisis, and second how, when the worst happened, God shut the mouths of the lions (Dan. 6:10). While we must keep a watchful eye open for the Devil we must never think he is stronger than God.

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20:12-23

This is a wonderful passage which begins and ends with reference to God. The whole speech is Jonathan's and it makes plain the extent of his commitment to David (17). But there is more in it than just human friendship, because we read later in 23:16 that it was a friendship and partnership in God and in God's service. To what extent Jonathan realised that his father was rejected by God is not clear (13). But he was quite clear that God was with David, and for that reason he was quite sure that all David's enemies would be dealt with by God (15) and that God's actions would be in terms of judgment (16). Jonathan even recognised that his commitment to David could well cost him his life (14) but he looked to a future planned by God in which he, through his family, would have a part (15). Here is a man who was prepared to risk his life for God's cause and God's servant. Paul's friends in his missionary life did the same (Rom.16:3-4). When you think that Jonathan, the king's son, was willing and ready to be the servant of the servant of God, you begin to see something of the man's stature and, indeed, his spiritual perception. He seemed to see that David was significantly at the centre of God's unfolding purposes and that persuaded him. It set him over against his own family, position and future inheritance. There was to be no going back and the place of his future service was to be in the heart of danger in the court of Saul. When you think of some of Jesus' words about discipleship (Lk.14:25-33), Jonathan's words in 20:4 simply glow with spiritual commitment. The final verse (23) expresses the safe and glorious basis for Christian relationships.

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20:24-34

As the situation developed note that Saul was well aware that David was destined to be king in due time (31) and that this meant his son Jonathan would never have royal status. This was intimated to Saul as far back as 15:23-28. How long it took for this to register clearly we cannot say but by now Saul saw David as the great threat to his future. Of course, Saul's argument was really with God, not David, but his anger focused on David and on his own son because he clearly had given his love and loyalty to David. In one sense it is a dangerous thing to commit ourselves in loyalty to men who are commissioned by God to lead His people. Such people, the leaders and those who stand by them, will always be targets for the Devil. We do not seek to justify Jonathan's lying to his father (28-29) and we must always be careful about resorting to intrigue and half-lies, or to the manipulating of situations and people by telling only half the truth. Keeping quiet when we ought to have spoken can put someone in great danger. At first Saul assumed some ceremonial "uncleanness" lay behind David's absence and there was no reaction. But as soon as the plausible lie was told there was an outburst of fury, possibly because he sensed he was being deceived, and the reaction was more extreme than anyone expected, even to the point of Jonathan's life being endangered. When we tamper with situations that affect God's work we can sometimes cause explosions that could have been avoided if we had been wiser and more cautious. When David and Jonathan were planning this scheme they really needed someone to say to them, "Is this wise?" Samuel could have been consulted, but young enthusiasts do not always ask advice from those they consider old, forgetting that years of experience teach a lot. Jonathan's defence of David (32) in terms of justice came too late and his angry reaction would not have pacified his father. Perhaps a quieter, more dignified protest would have had more effect.

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20:35-42

Keep in mind the uncertainty and natural anxiety of David as he waited for news and remember also the pressures on Jonathan throughout the two days in his father's palace. It is never easy to be involved in spiritual warfare and there can be a draining of emotional as well as spiritual vitality. This, together with the very real bonds of human friendship, may explain in part the intensity of the reaction when the two friends met, knowing they must part. Of course, the Devil would certainly be active in such a time of crisis and he is clever at causing an excess of emotional reaction. We must never totally stifle human feelings, whether of sorrow or joy, and we must allow these feelings to be expressed at the right time and place, so that a right and necessary therapy operates. But not only an undue stifling of feelings but also an excessive expression of them can be harmful. Both men were now aware that

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the situation was far more grim and threatening than they had thought, and they were indeed grateful that they had each other for support. But even friendships in God can overbalance and in measure it seems both men, especially David, were more aware of each other than of God until Jonathan spoke the words of v.42. God and His service were once again central to and determinative of their relationship. David had recovered from his emotional distress, which certainly seems to have been excessive and, counselled by Jonathan, he departed with some measure of peace. But how can there be peace in such situations which are so demanding and so ravaging of emotions? It is only our minds, fixed on truth, which can enable us to reach the ground of peace. We must fix our thoughts on God, who is the God of peace (Rom. 16:20; Heb. 13:20) and who is able to keep us in peace (Isa, 26:3). One last thought: true friendships are those that turn us more and more to God, and make us more and more willing and happy to be committed to God and to regard His service as having the highest claim.

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20:35-42

It is important to note that Jonathan went back to the city and to his father's house where relationships would be far more tense and far less pleasant than in his fellowship with David. In his home Jonathan had taken a stand for spiritual truth, righteousness and for God's servant David, and this had caused a bitter confrontation. There was estrangement in the family home. But Jonathan was still bound by the commandments of God to honour his father and mother even when, and especially when, they were themselves living contrary to God. After all, if we claim to love God, and God is the One who so loved the world that He gave His Son, should there not be reflected and expressed in our lives and attitudes the desire of God to draw sinners to Himself? When Christ is the first love and loyalty of our hearts and lives, we will not love parents and families less but more, and in the home situation we will be the nearest and most immediate "word of God" to them. We may be grieved by their spiritual blindness, by their worldliness and indifference to God; and we may become impatient with them and end up badgering them and belabouring them with our preaching, usually causing them to be angry. What we have to remember is that while we were still sinners God commended His love to us (Rom. 5:8) showing us then and down through our lives immense patience and forbearance. Now, if God has loved us like that, we are under obligation to show that same love and patience to others. Granted there are bonds, spiritual bonds in Christ, that are deeper than the bonds of flesh and blood. But the love of God in Jesus Christ should make us better and more loving, not less loving, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, husbands and wives. Jonathan's place of witness and service was now at home.

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21:1-15

It is best to read the whole of this chapter and then to consider the details. Note first the contrast between the wonderful fellowship in service shared by David and Jonathan with the terrible humiliation of v.12-15. One explanation of this sad experience is that David was on the run (10) and seems to have gone blundering on without quite knowing what he was doing or where he was going. In a sense he had no option but to depart because Saul was intent on murdering him. But being driven by fear from one fear to a greater one (v.10, 12) is not faith. Of course there was the emotional exhaustion we spoke about in the last chapter and it is clear that David was full of apprehension. Not even the sword of Goliath in his hand was able to awaken the confidence of faith, reminding him that in the past the Lord had helped him win a great victory (1 Sam. 7:12). Another explanation of David's situation and reactions is of course the ongoing, relentless pressure of the enemy, not Saul but the Devil. There is something instantly sinister about the mention of Doeg (7). On the face of it, it was an unfortunate coincidence but we have to recognise that the agents of the Devil are scattered far and wide and in God's service we are always in the midst of foes. There is no indication that David was aware he was being spied on but, of course, the Devil does not always attack instantly. The pressure on David went on, and there is a fascinating reference in Daniel 7:25 to persons and pressures, human and devilish, that wear out the saints of God. The battle David was fighting here was very different from the clear, open confrontation with Goliath. This was the steady, persistent pressure of the evil one against God's man in an attempt to destroy his future.

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21:1-15

Keep in mind the series of events that led David to this situation and be prepared for the further development of the story in the next chapter, because David's actions here led to terrible hurt for many other people. In 20:3 it is clear David was gripped with both fear and dread, and this continued to be a powerful influence clouding his faith and bringing a weakness of attitude and action that was a contradiction of his naturally brave temperament (17:32-36). The appearance of David seems to have alarmed Ahimelech but his concern may have been more concern for David (perhaps knowing from Samuel of David's anointing as king) than fear of being involved with him. By this stage David seems to have been trusting no one and he lied deliberately to the priest instead of trusting him as a man of God. It seems that the priest was a wise, balanced, holy man who was aware that the shewbread on the altar, although set apart for the use of the priests, could be given for the preservation of life under certain circumstances. On being assured by David that he and his men were "set apart" to do God's work the bread was given. Our Lord used this incident to rebuke the Pharisees for their rigid interpretation of the law concerning the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28). There is no suggestion that Jesus excused the lies David told. We cannot tell from our chapter how much of the conversation between David and the priest was overheard by Doeg but this becomes evident later (22:9-10). All David was concerned about was his immediate situation and he was handling it in human terms, seemingly without reference to God. He seems to have forgotten all about God. There is no indication of any spiritual unburdening of his heart to Ahimelech, such as he had done to Samuel (19:18). Why can a man be so deeply spiritual on one occasion and then be so unspiritual? This is the work of Satan.

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21:1-15

Read the whole chapter again because we can see so much of our own foolishness and complications in it. But go on to the first verse of the next chapter and see David hiding in the cave. God's man was on the run. He fled from King Saul and ended up in the palace of Goliath's king. There, even the godless had heard of David and his mighty exploits, but when David became aware of this he was even more afraid. His faith seems to have evaporated but he was so constantly agitated, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, that he gave himself no opportunity to have faith. His heart was fixed on his circumstances not on God, and faith is essentially "to hold fast in God." We are told in Scripture to humble ourselves under God's hand (1 Pet. 5:6) and at times God humbles us in order that He might lift us up with clearer vision and stronger faith (1 Pet. 1:3-9). But God never humiliates us and when we see David scabbling on the floor and slaving at the mouth, a picture of shame, we can be sure this was the work of the Devil. Of course, this is what can happen when men and women of God stray and take themselves out from the shelter of God's good and perfect will. But there is a wonderful lesson still to learn, one that is full of comfort and encouragement. The Devil went too far in his tempting, threatening and humiliating David, and Achish refused to let him stay. In this way, sore, shamed, and feeling guilty and miserable, David was set on the road that was to take him back to God and to service greater and fuller than he had yet known. But it was in his desolation in the cave that David gave us the words of Psalm 142. At last, feeling that no one cared for him, he began to speak to God. If only he had done this before he started running away! When panic seizes, stop, look to God, and listen. It will help you to think clearly and act more surely.

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22:1-2

In the providence of God a great change had been wrought in David before these men began to gather to him. Had this not been so the situation could have gone from bad to worse and David could have ended up the chief of a gang of brigands, ravaging the countryside, and creating endless complications for the developing work of God. We see the change in David if we read Psalm 34, the heading of which refers to the time when David feigned madness before Achish. The opening of the Psalm (1-10) tells of how the poor man cried to God and tasted of His

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goodness. The next section (11-14) is all about guarding the tongue and keeping it from speaking lies. David did not always do this in the future, but who are we to criticise a man for falling into the snare of old sins? The final section of the Psalm (15-22) testifies to what David had forgotten, namely that God's eye is always on His people to watch over them and to deliver them unbroken from the mess their sins get them into. How we need to remember that the Lord is near! In Psalm 56 we again have words related to David's time in Gath. Read especially v.1, 3, 8, 13 and see the contrast between being trampled on and walking before God in the light of life. Walking in obedience to the will of God may be costly, and even dark at times (Ps. 23:4) but we have the promise from Jesus of the light of life (John 8:12). Psalm 57 is also related to this time in David's experience. Again read the whole Psalm but note carefully v.1-2 where the man of God speaks of being sheltered by the wings of God, the God who fulfils His purpose for His servants (Phil.1:6). When the shepherd gave us the Shepherd Psalm he taught us that when we are lost, God will find us. When we stray He will bring us back. When perplexed He will lead us. What a God to have! But it was by a strange and costly path that David learned.

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22:1-5

The cave of Adullam is generally regarded as the scene of a gathering of discontented and disgruntled men, and down the years congregations like Sandyford, and others of a similar ministry, have been so described. Of course, biblical ministries do draw in people, men and women, who are discontents in whatever congregation they go to, never feeling properly appreciated, never being given a platform to express their "gifts", real or imagined, and generally feeling rather superior in spiritual terms. Such people seldom stay long, or if they do they can prove to be a drag and distraction. On the other hand there are those who have become heartbroken for themselves and their children sitting under ministries that have no spiritual food to offer, no instruction in truth and righteousness, and no desire whatever for the Gospel of salvation and life in Jesus Christ. Who can blame such people if they seek both fellowship and leadership in a place where there is evidence of God's blessing and hope for the future? This is how it was with the men who gathered to David. Remember they were men who grieved and suffered under the godless influence of Saul and had done so for some considerable time. This was not a sudden decision on their part. Remember too that there is no suggestion that David invited them, let alone enticed them. In fact David, as we have seen, was not in a very good condition himself, and yet there was an awareness on the part of others that God was with this man and that he was the key to a better future for the whole nation. On the face of it the gathering in the cave was not impressive. Some may have thought of David as an outlaw on the run from the king, gathering a gang of riff-raff. But then appearances can be deceptive. There was little in the stable at Bethlehem or at the place called Calvary to suggest that world-changing events were taking place. There was little to suggest that a group of eleven men (the twelfth having proved to be a devil) could or would turn the world upside down, but they did (Acts 17:6).

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22:1-5

Note that this gathering was not a national move of repentance but a limited gathering of four hundred men, and they were going into hiding. Note too that it was the ravaging influence of evil hurting their lives that led them to David, just as the burden and power of sin makes many others seek for a Saviour. Note also the contrast in the "leaving" in v.1 and 5. The story begins with David humiliated, shattered and confused, but it develops with David restored to calmness, dignity and purpose. He was no longer rushing around in panic but waiting on God (3). In that more stable, spiritual state he is seen as a man with a real human care for his parents. After all, as v.1 suggests, his family were the first to go to his side in his time of shame and failure. We must remember that, under the providence of God, David's failure, brought about by his own impulsive actions, was the "means of grace" that brought him to the place where he recognised that the basis of usefulness in service is being what God wants, where God wants and when God wants. We have commented on David's gentleness of character seen in his care for his family but we must also see the calibre of the man in terms of his capacity to train a company of men into a

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disciplined fighting band and also in terms of winning from them a marvellous loyalty. We will see as the story develops that some of these men would do anything for their captain, for no other reason than that they loved and respected him, and recognised just how much they owed to him in so many ways. What would some of these men have become but for David's influence and leadership? What would some of us have become but for the fact that Christ laid hold on us, kept hold of us in spite of everything, and persevered in His love and mercy. Gratitude, if real and recognised, will lead to willing and dependable service given, not because of duty but because of love.

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22:6-10

We are not surprised to find that immediately after this promising new start to David's life and service the enemy emerged as active and bitter as ever. The Devil never gives up and we must be on guard at significant and successful stages in life and work. Remember that David had been counselled by the prophet (5) to leave the apparent security of the hills and return to Judah. Having waited on God and asked for guidance (3) he obeyed, even though he must have known he was going back to dangerous territory. What we have to see in today's verses is an indication of how events in David's past now begin to have a sinister effect on his present situation. Saul is pictured surrounded by his "yes" men, who had all benefited in place, power and possessions because of their commitment to him and his evil schemes. (Does it not make you think of people like Saddam Hussein or Mugabe?) Saul's words are a mixture of threat, pleading, and the blackmail of self-pity. Doeg, seeing opportunity for his own advancement, spoke up, and in doing so deliberately incriminated Ahimelech the priest. He may have had some grudge against the priest. The statement in 21:7 that Doeg was "detained" before the Lord may indicate some discipline, requirement or some suggestion that the priest had informed Doeg that he was not right with God. Many a Christian down the years has reacted in resentment and bitterness when "corrected" by a man of God and later on has spoken deliberately to discredit God's servant. It is not enough afterwards to say, "I did not mean harm, and never thought it would lead to crisis." if we are not sure of the nature and potential of our words we had best not speak them. Psalm 52 is quite a comment on the whole situation.

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22:11-23

Evil men, like their master Satan, will go to any lengths to twist the truth in order to gain their objective. We must sense the ruthless anger of Saul in his summons to the priest and in the bitter accusation he made (13). There was no suggestion in the earlier story that the priest was conspiring against Saul and the situation was that Saul was wanting to trap David. There is a wonderful dignity in Ahimelech's reply. After all, there is no need for a man of God to be afraid of a king or a politician whose heart and mind are perverted and obsessed with enmity to God. The priest bore witness to David's character, although he must have now known that David had lied to him and that he had not been on the king's business (21:2, 8). But in relation to Saul, David had indeed been a man of truth and loyalty and it needed to be said. Then Ahimelech seems to have said, "I have prayed for David many a time before; what was wrong in praying again?" He could have added that if David was as bad as the king suggested then there was all the more reason to pray for him. But when a man's mind and heart are obsessed with evil grudges and irrational fears, spiritual reasoning simply does not register. Saul pronounced the death sentence and called on the guards to carry it out, but they refused to touch the priest, the Lord's anointed (1 Chron. 16:22). This may have been due to the fact that even among Saul's personal guard there was still enough awareness of God and of holy things to awe them into disobeying the king. God does set limits on evil, but it is not always evident and Doeg was quite prepared to do the terrible work of execution. No doubt he did it for personal advancement or perhaps for revenge against the priest. Judas did the same for thirty pieces of silver (Matt. 26:14-16).

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22:11-23

As we leave the scene of the slaughter at Nob we wonder what reaction there must have been among some at least of Saul's men at what had been done with such disregard for God and for holy things. A reaction against evil can be the first step in the direction of righteousness. As for Doeg, we simply remind ourselves that he would have his reward. God would see to that in due time, in this world or the next. It is appointed unto men once to die and after this the judgment (Heb. 9:27). Evil never "gets off" but even the vilest offender can be forgiven because the price of sin was paid by the Saviour. But now, ponder the distress of David's heart when he heard the news. Note how quickly he recalled the past. He had seen Doeg that day when he was speaking with the priest and had been aware of possible danger. What regrets he must have had! But the past cannot be recalled and David would carry a burden of guilt (whether he should have done so or not) for the rest of his days. But instead of lapsing into an attitude of bemoaning his failures, which would have left him preoccupied with his sins and would have made all the people preoccupied with his sins as well, David took an attitude of responsibility, pledging himself to protect Ahitub. He also said to the young man, "We are in this together under God, but you will be safe with me." Is there not something here that makes us think of the fellowship of Christ's sufferings? (Phil. 3:7-11; 2 Tim. 2:12) We are in the battle together, but we are indeed safe with Him! David was the leader and he knew it. He accepted his God-given task gladly, aware of the burden of responsibility. He had his personal sorrows, griefs, regrets and burdens but to a great extent these had to be carried privately. This is one reason why we find the Psalms of David so movingly instructive and inspiring. They tell of a man who knew he could open his heart to God, the great burden-bearer.

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23:1-5

There is a simple but important lesson in these opening verses. David now had an "army" of fighting men and he was aware that Saul was not only his sworn enemy but that the country was suffering under the baneful influence of a ruler rejected by God. Already David had some sense of being the "protector" of the nation and he was the man appealed to when the Philistines were attacking Keilah. There was obviously a situation of need. There was an enemy despoiling an area of the life and work of God's people. But the need and danger do not constitute a call to action and David made it his business to seek guidance from God. We are not told how the guidance came. The emphasis is on the fact that David had no desire to launch out on any venture without the assurance that it was God's will to do so. David believed he had his clear guidance, but it says a great deal for the calibre of his spiritual character that when his loyal men expressed doubts and fears David did not over-ride them, nor did he disparage their doubts, nor did he accuse them of disloyalty. He went again to God for confirmation of his guidance and when this was given David knew he was neither leading his men into an unnecessary battle nor opening up the way for the enemy to attack and despoil the work of God. We must learn from this and realise that sometimes in the decisions we make we are being far too individual, considering only how our own situation and convictions will be affected. We need to learn to take a wide and long-term view of what God is doing with both the church and the nation. We have seen in the earlier part of the story (21:10 is an example) that David had a tendency to be impetuous and this part of his personality had to be curbed and trained if he was to be a good king and leader of the people in years to come. God is always working towards the future, not just with us as individuals, but with His plan for the world. The issues are great. That is why we must be careful.

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23:6-14

Abiathar had come down with the "ephod" and this may suggest something of the method of guidance used by David in v.1-5. The ephod seems to have been an upper garment of the priest, possibly holding jewels inscribed with the names of the tribes of Israel. On enquiry God made His will known with a yes or no answer (Ex. 28:12, 28-30; Num. 27:21; 1 Sam. 28:6). We must not think in terms of something like a "crystal ball" but rather of a direct and specific enquiring of God. Of course it is in walking with God and learning what God is like, seeking

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Him and His guidance in our study of the Word, in worship and fellowship, and in asking for the wise comments of older and more experienced Christians (not just our contemporaries) that we will be safely guided. It is clear from v.7 that people can come to totally wrong conclusions. Saul was quite sure that circumstances and evidences made plain that God was against David and for himself. Now, if we ally this with Saul's bitter, relentless enmity against David, we begin to see just how blind and devilish people can be. They see only what they want to see, and reasoning with them is futile. We must also see here that it was at a time in David's life when he was clearly set on doing God's will that the enemy came with great intensity. This is not surprising but we tend to forget and to be taken by surprise by the rushing attacks of the Devil (1 Pet. 5:8). If we forget we are engaged in spiritual warfare we will not be ready to stand firm, and our spiritual service, not just our own peace of mind and heart, will be affected (Eph. 6:10-20). Never forget, a dedicated Christian set on doing God's will is a target for the Devil and a danger to his kingdom.

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23:6-14

The first thing to note is David's reliance on the Lord. As soon as he was aware of the situation he took it to God in prayer. The next thing to note is David's realism and his understanding of human nature. Although he had delivered the people of Keilah from danger and destruction, he knew full well that human gratitude can be a very fickle thing, even among God's people. Those who owe an immense debt of gratitude and whose lives have been rescued and reinstated can so easily forget the person who ministered to them and can in fact become enemies. Is it not true that we also forget the debt we owe to God for His countless mercies and deliverances and become not only casual in service but resentful at being asked to serve? It can also be true that Christians who owe a great debt to the ministry and fellowship of their own congregations give very little by way of return and give their service by clear choice elsewhere. There is such a thing as a debt of gratitude and this is an important element in guidance. Keep in mind the hurt and disappointment David must have felt when the Lord confirmed that the men of Keilah would in fact surrender him to the enemy. He took no action against them but simply removed himself and his men from Keilah, leaving them to their own devices and, of course, to the possible, unreasonable and senseless vindictiveness of Saul. One last thing to note, and it is a very practical lesson, is that David, on hearing the rumour that Saul was coming, did not immediately jump to conclusions but enquired of the Lord whether or not this was a real danger. Never forget that the Devil is a liar and he makes use of alarming suggestions and possibilities in order to panic us and so to steal our peace. Once the Devil gets us restless he can persuade us to do all sorts of foolish things.

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23:15-18

Here is a clear example of the irrational nature of unbelief, stirred up by the Devil. Throughout the whole of the first half of the chapter we have seen David looking to God, waiting on God and obeying God, but now he was again gripped by fear (14-17). Of course we must remember the significance of v.14, which tells of the on-going tension, watchfulness and danger of being constantly hunted by Saul. David knew that God had kept him all along the line and yet he ended up in fear. This could be the result of sheer tiredness in a man worn down and worn out by the demands of his situation, which involved leadership of and responsibility for many others. The fear could also have flooded in simply because David found time to relax after a long spell of demand. When at "action stations" people can go on for very long spells summoning up reserves of energy, but when eventually the tiredness is allowed to register the reaction can be the kind of desolation that exhaustion brings. We are not told how Jonathan knew David's great need of support at that time but very possibly he had been keeping abreast of all his father was doing and realised the toll it would be taking on David. Jonathan was the kind of friend who thought clearly and sensibly and, because he no doubt prayed for David, he realised that this kind of situation needed not just prayer but that real, spiritual caring that goes in human terms to the side of the exhausted man of God to strengthen and encourage him. We can only imagine what these two men talked about. They would surely have spoken of God and His purposes. Jonathan certainly made plain to David his confidence and his pledged support.

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But it was the flesh and blood presence of Jonathan and his spoken words that made his spiritual ministry so valuable. When the disciples were desolate after the Cross, the risen Jesus came to them (John 20:19,26). In Gethsemane the disciples had slept when the human Jesus needed them most (Mark 14:34-42). When Paul needed his friends most, not one of them was there to be a human support (2 Tim. 4:16-18).

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23:19-29

The passage begins with the base treachery of the Ziphites and ends with the glorious, sovereign intervention by God. Do not fail to see that God had prepared David for this crisis by Jonathan's visit and encouraging words (15-18). Possibly neither Jonathan nor David realised at the time just how significant a meeting of friends that was but, without doubt, David's mind and heart had been fixed on God so that there is no sign of fear or panic even when it seemed the enemy was in fact closing in for the kill (26). Jonathan may have given David a "word from the Lord" such as was spoken later by Hezekiah in 2 Chron. 32:7-8. Why the Ziphites were so set on betraying David is not made clear. It may have been fear of Saul or simply fear of taking a stand with David. It is amazing how many people, even Christians, seem to be unwilling to commit themselves, especially if a work of God is at what seems to be an uncertain stage facing lots of opposition. In v.19-24 it does seem that the Ziphites had made their decision as to whose side they were on in order to gain something for themselves. Why they were so set against David is not stated but worldly people have an inbred resistance to and dislike of what belongs to God. This is not surprising in view of 1 John 5:19; Rom.1:18-23; and Jesus' words in John 15:18-25. We tend to be too innocent in our attitudes to the world and its people, and are surprised when they manifest their dislike of and opposition to the Gospel and those who serve the Gospel. We need to grasp more clearly the teaching of Scripture which makes plain that the carnal or worldly mind is at enmity to God (Rom. 8:7); that the natural heart of man is corrupt and diseased (Jer. 17:9); and that men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil (John 3:19). Realism helps us to cope with life and service.

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23:19-29

We saw yesterday the deep and persistent enmity of the world, the flesh and the Devil against the people and work of God. We do well to remind ourselves that in obedient service to God we are always engaged in spiritual warfare and the real enemy is Satan himself behind the human enemies who are his instruments (Eph. 6:12). There is never any doubt as to the final outcome of the battle because the victory has been won and we stand in the victory Christ won in His death and resurrection (Col. 2:15; 1 Cor. 15:57). We must also remember that God is never on the defensive even though His people and work can seem to be on the verge of disaster. In today's story it is important to note just how far God allowed the "disaster" to proceed before He intervened. It seems that God left it to the last moment, but we must not think of God taking risks. His methods and timing are always perfect (Acts 1:7; John 7:30; 13:1; 17:1). There is always clear purpose in what God does and what He allows, and He is always preparing His servants for the long-term work that lies ahead of them. If we read Psalm 54, taking note of the title, we will realise that David did in fact learn a great deal from this experience. He learned that God in His sovereignty rules in the nations and is able to use the godless Philistines to work deliverance and to turn away the enemy. He learned just how carefully and immediately God watches over every situation that involves His people and His work. It is true that God tests the faith of His servants (James 1:2-4), not to demolish faith but to make it stronger and to confirm to the believer that he really does put his trust in God. It is vitally important to remember that God is for us not against us (Rom. 8:31), and therefore we see here that God is teaching David rather than testing him. After all, God wants us to be as well prepared for the future as can possibly be.

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24:1-7

God's preparation of David for the future was to teach him faith, that is to trust God with his person, his work and his circumstances. This means that every situation has to be referred to God so that the servant of God will neither jump to conclusions nor act precipitately simply because opportunity presents itself. In today's incident Saul was at the mercy of David and his men, and it would have been so easy, as it seems his men suggested, for David to "strike while the iron was hot". Note that it was David's men, who loved him and were loyal to him, who were the source of temptation and pressure. They urged him to take a course of action that was contrary to God's will and David, being human, must have felt a tremendous tension and conflict within himself. Our Lord Jesus faced the same temptation when his close friend Peter, at Caesarea Philippi, tried to turn Him back from the way of the Cross. Peter, who loved his Lord, was that day doing Devil's work (Matt. 16:21-23). In David's story there were many doing Devil's work. In v.1 we see Saul's unrelenting hatred of and opposition to David. Every fresh indication that God's hand was on David for good seemed to fuel the fire of Saul's hatred. It is a frightening thought. From the time of Saul's rejection by God (15:26) to his death (31:4) some ten years elapsed, and right to the end Saul persisted in his enmity. Neither God's words, nor God's providences, nor David's grace had any effect in softening Saul's heart nor changing his attitude. We should think well of the warning in Heb. 3:12 regarding an evil heart of unbelief that takes a person further and further away from God. Think also of the warning about the hardening and deceiving effect of sin (Heb. 3:13). Be sure to take note also of the fact that right through the story there were always plenty people ready and willing to speak against David and to betray him into the hands of Saul (22:6; 23:7,13,19; 24:1; 26:1). It seems that at one point David had the same experience as Jesus who was betrayed by a friend (Matt. 26:47-50; Ps. 41:9).

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24:1-7

This incident makes plain how the refining fires of David's sore experiences were in fact forging true godliness of character. He was ashamed that he had come down to the level of scoring a point against Saul, particularly in a manner that would shame the king. It was a second-rate victory and not the way a future king should behave. It was not the right kind of example and David felt his action had not been worthy of God (Eph. 4:1; Phil.1:27). But at heart David's attitude was positive, and it stemmed from his faith. He put his cause into the hand of God (1 Pet. 4:19), and this is what we must always do when we know our cause is right. For a moment, influenced by the enthusiasm of his friends, David was tempted to take things into his own hand and to execute judgment on Saul who had done him so much unjust harm. But then he affirmed his faith, saying that the God who put Saul in his place as king would be the God who would remove him from that place. Judgment belongs to God not to man (Rom.12:19). Perhaps, without knowing it, David was being held back by God from assuming the kingship (to which he was called and anointed by God) because the people were not yet ready to be led by him. After all, we have seen just how many there were who were still committed to Saul. To precipitate a civil war would not serve God's purpose. There is a time to stand and challenge, but the way of confrontation is often taken because people are impatient and not willing to wait for God. One last lesson: we have seen the persistence and virulence of evil and all Saul's willing spies and helpers, but we see also the incompetence and vulnerability of evil in that Saul entered the caves alone unaware of danger and totally defenceless. The Devil is not nearly so clever as he thinks.

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24:8-15

In the hill country of Engedi the slopes are steep and bare, and men could call to each other across the valleys without danger of immediate chase and capture. When Saul was at a safe distance but still within earshot David reasserted his dignity and went out into the open to speak to Saul who was by then standing with his own men. David's words were not only a rebuttal of the slander against him but an appeal to Saul to recognise that he was being swayed by men and by his own passions and prejudices to work against the will of God. David defended his own character and actions, and there is a time to do that, just as there is a time to turn the other cheek (1 Pet. 2:20-

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23). But there was more than David's personal reputation at stake. The work of God in its future development was being imperilled by Saul's increasingly devilish attitudes and that had to be exposed. Note how David brings the whole situation into the presence of the Lord (10), as if to say, "We are both dealing with God, answerable to Him, and being dealt with by Him. Be careful, lest either of us ends up fighting against God." There is great dignity in David in v.12 and great realism as he warns Saul that evil is self-destructive (13). It is amazing just how politely David spoke to this man who had slandered and persecuted him and had spoken of him in such contemptuous terms (14). But at the same time the truth had to be spoken. There is a time to speak and a time to be silent (Eccles. 3:1-8). There is a time to be submissive and to forfeit rights, and a time when, for the Gospel's sake, we must stand our ground and require others to make public apology for their wrong (Acts 16:35-40). It is only as we walk closely with God that we know which issues to take up and which to leave to God.

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24:16-22

Keep in mind that this was not a private conversation between David and Saul but one carried out in the hearing of the soldiers on both sides. Saul was in a difficult position regarding his reputation because David was clearly on the higher ground morally. In a situation like this tears can be a calculated reaction, a form of blackmail to win people over. Tears do not necessarily mean regret, let alone repentance, and in this case they could have been tears of frustration on the part of a highly strung, evil man whose every scheme seemed to have been thwarted. Saul's words of praise for David do not ring true; they are too fulsome and over-spiritual. It is best to be on guard when people who have manifested a bitter, resentful, critical spirit suddenly become pious and begin to talk about the Lord. Of course, Saul gave himself away when in v.20 he acknowledged openly that he knew David would be king. That means he had known all along that he was opposing and persecuting the man into whose hands God had committed the future of the kingdom. In v.21-22 the onlookers may well have thought that lasting peace had been made between Saul and David. It appeared that Saul had accepted the fact that David and his descendants would reign over the kingdom, and that Saul and his family would have protection guaranteed to them without retaliation. But appearances can be deceptive and in 26:1-2 we find Saul unchanged in his evil opposition to David. It was/is not enough to profess a change of heart. There must be practical evidences. There were no such evidences in Saul. He was a man who had gone too far. He was beyond remedy, beyond redemption, and his person and life were growing darker all the time. Did he ever look back to the fateful day when the choice was made to live his life contrary to God? We cannot tell, but we remind ourselves that decisions are important, more important than they may seem at the time.

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25:1

The day Samuel died the whole nation was moved deeply and at the prophet's funeral he was given more respect, honour and recognition than he had ever received during his life and ministry. But eulogies and tributes at death cannot compensate for the harsh things said about him and to him during life, nor for the rejection of his ministry (8:4-7,19-22). Of course there were those who valued and honoured Samuel, not least David (19:18), but to a great extent he was a prophet without honour. He had been the instrument of God in turning the spiritual tide within the nation, reinstating the Word of God (3:19-4:1a). He had been the voice of God in many crises, but for a long time he had been out of sight and out of mind. The last reference to him was regarding David and the schools of the prophets where men were being trained for future ministry (19:18-20). But Samuel had not been inactive. He had given a promise in 12:19-23 and he had been the intercessor for God's people and work consistently down the years. Something of the calibre of his prayers is testified to by God in Jer.15:1; Ps. 99:6. It is doubtful if even at his funeral the people really knew just how much they owed to this faithful man of God. Perhaps they did wonder who would now do the work of intercession. Many Christians want to be prayed for, and acknowledge the importance of prayer, but how many are willing for the discipline and commitment that trains them to be intercessors? Besides being a man of God and a man of prayer whose intercessions guarded and guided the nation, he was also a man of

integrity whose whole life-style was an example and challenge to the people. Every public figure in the gospel, whether minister or elder, must seek to be able to make the same testimony as Samuel and Paul. Read 1 Sam. 12: 1-5; Acts 20:17-19; 1 Thess. 1:5-12. Peter gives the same call in 1 Pet. 5:1-5. The standard is very high.

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25:1-13

We spoke yesterday about the significance of Samuel's life and ministry but we are shown now that the atmosphere of the nation had by no means been totally purged of evil. We are introduced to Nabal who, in spite of a godly background (descended from Caleb, who followed the Lord fully, Num. 14:20-24) was a churlish, boorish (3), ill-natured fool (25). It is clear from his words that he was a man who much preferred a man like Saul to men like Samuel and David. He was a worldly, materialistic, unspiritual man, quite prepared to benefit from the protection of David's soldiers but with not the slightest intention of making any commitment or even response to the man whom he knew even though he protested ignorance (10). David's approach was full of grace, and the contemptuous rejection of his request stung him deeply and very nearly precipitated a major blunder of revenge. David, of course, would have been deeply affected by Samuel's death and may have anticipated an upsurge of evil as a result of the end of the prophet's influence. In the wilderness area of Maon (Paran) there may have been a sense of isolation. Jonathan his friend could not come to him and Samuel, his father in the faith, was no longer with him. It is little wonder that David felt vulnerable and that made him react to Nabal in a way that was really a contradiction of his spiritual character. Of course, reacting to a situation (and we all tend to do so) is not acting in faith. We have seen already and we shall see again that David had a tendency to act without thinking and it got him into all manner of disastrous situations (21:10; 27:1; 2 Sam. 11:2-3). At the end of today's passage David is already committed to action and determined in his anger to have revenge on Nabal. We must think more about this in order to learn a final lesson.

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25:1-13

Think back to the previous chapter (24:5-6), when David won a spiritual victory by refusing to take judgment into his own hands. Look forward to 26:7-11 when again David took the high spiritual ground and left himself and his cause in the safe, good hand of God. Now, it is between these two spiritual victories that the story of Nabal is set and we have to see it as an example of the "fiery darts of the evil one", a sudden, unexpected, undeserved attack that stung the man of God when he was vulnerable in his feelings of sorrow and when he was being led forward into God's future service. In chapters 24 and 26 David triumphs in the big issues, facing the main enemy, and in chapter 25, in a secondary issue, he nearly falls. What we have to learn is that spiritual service is a day to day business and we must watch and pray because the enemy is always setting snares to trap us. We must also see very clearly that one failure does not necessarily disqualify a servant of God in respect of his on-going service. Faith must learn to speak in the terms of Micah 7:8. But we must also see in this story how promptly and effectively God acted in His sovereign providence to protect and to deliver David from a course of action that could have led to all sorts of complications. Already in the situation we have Nabal's wife Abigail, as pleasant, attractive and worthy a character as Nabal was objectionable. We cannot but wonder how a woman like this ended up married to such a miserable man. This was indeed an unequal yoke (2 Cor. 6:14). Had it been an arranged marriage? If so, what could parents have been thinking to give their daughter to such a man? Was it the man's wealth that attracted both the girl and her parents? Did she know he was a man without faith but married him in the hope of changing him? What do we look for in a partner? Is it someone in earnest about God who will encourage and enable us to be the same? What have we to give in a partnership? Would we be a spiritual and a human help or liability? Relationships have to be prayed about. They can have long-term consequences.

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25:14-22

Note that God was at work from both sides of the situation. We see that Abigail was not only attractive and wise (3) but gracious in her influence and decisive in her actions. She was clearly the one who gave the household its good and righteous atmosphere. Even the servants recognised that David was a good man who had protected them rather than imposed on them. They also recognised that Nabal's reaction had been totally unworthy as well as unwise and, being a stubborn, graceless man, no-one could plead with him to be sensible. Without any reference to Nabal, the woman and her servants set out on a mission of peace. Do not fail to see that there was being put into action a significant piece of work with far reaching consequences. Nabal was not only left out of it, he was unaware of it, and all because of his bitter, grudging, worldly, money-greedy spirit. People can be so sour in attitude and thought, so devaluing of those on whom God's hand is laid, that they are not only left out, they are exposed as hindrances to and opponents of the work of God. Travelling from the other side, we see David, fuming with anger and resentment, his pride hurt, and determined to exercise judgment on the miserable Nabal. He was quite sure that he was God's man and that God was with him in what he was doing (22). But there is no sign now of the high dignity and restraint David had shown in relation to Saul's wrongdoing against him. There is no sign of David's former attitude that he would leave to God the outworking of righteous judgment, sure that God's timing would be perfect (Deut. 32:35). All unknown to David, God had prepared the way of escape from this wrong situation (1 Cor. 10:13). Abigail met him. Unlike Nabal, David was open to reason. What a blessing it is, and a safety, if we are willing to listen to wise words when we ourselves are "steamed up" with anger and resentment!

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25:23-31

When Abigail began this appeal to David she must have wondered what the issue would be. Her own future, as well as that of her household, depended on David's reaction, and no doubt his face was stern and angry. The woman's attitude was right: she was open and honest, she made no excuses for Nabal's behaviour and, in v.25, admitted openly that her husband was a fool. But the most important thing in her words to David was her manifest spiritual awareness. Her reasoning set the whole incident into the context of God's will, God's purposes, God's providence and God's manifest choice of David to be His servant king. There is no indication that Abigail tried to influence David by her own manifest attractiveness. It was her spiritual clarity and conviction that impressed David and made him aware of how God had indeed saved him from making a great mistake. It needed Abigail to remind David that his whole life and future were in the sure care of God, and that it was vital that in his future service he should not have to live with regrets about this particular event (28-31). David had not expected to meet someone like this, but God had arranged it through a spiritually minded woman married to a thoroughly objectionable man. God kept David from going astray. There is a prayer in Psalm 19:13 asking that we should be kept from presumptuous sins. How is this done? We need to walk closely with God, making sure we listen to Him when He speaks in His Word or through friends and circumstances. We need to have the right kind of friends and be in the right church. We need to be sensitive to God when we are led through sickness or health, and when He gives or withholds our dearest hopes. Trust in the Lord and lean on Him, not on your own understanding (Prov. 3:5-7). Wait on the Lord (Ps. 27:14), especially when your feelings are in a turmoil.

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25:32-35

The thing to notice here is the description of David's attitude compared to what is said in v.13,21-22. In mind, heart, spirit and emotion David has been turned right back to God. Up to this point his own anger and hurt had caused a cloud to hide God from his consciousness. Now, in the most gracious, gentle and appealing way, God had made Himself known again to David, and the man was both relieved and delighted. What an encouragement it must have been to David to realise that God had been watching over him so carefully! This was indeed the Lord's doing and marvellous in his eyes (Ps. 118:23). It is indeed deeply moving and a great encouragement in Christian life and service to look back over the years and become aware that there has indeed been a hand guiding and a

heart planning and a power keeping us, even when we have not known it and even more when we have been out of sorts spiritually. What a debt we owe to the grace and goodness of our God! Of course, David not only recognised what God had done and gave thanks to Him, he recognised and spoke publicly before the two companies of servants acknowledging and giving thanks for what the woman had done and for the way she had done it. There is something important here because if gratitude is not expressed in the right way and at the right time, whether to God or to men and women, we are in danger of becoming mean in spirit and rather unattractive people. Sometimes we speak heartfelt words of thanks to God when in fact we should be speaking to someone who may have found it very costly to have ministered to us. Sometimes we pray for people, asking God to bless them for being so kind to us, when we should be speaking to the person and showing them in some simple way our gratitude. Remember Jesus' words in Matt.25:42-45.

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25:36-44

The end of this passage makes plain that David, spiritually minded man that he was, had not failed to notice the human attractiveness and the spiritual calibre of Abigail. Nor had Abigail failed to see the true character of David, and their marriage seems to have been the fruit of a relationship that began by being deeply and significantly involved in the work of God. Of course we have also to note that already David's matrimonial life was becoming complicated. Michal had been taken from him by Saul and given to another and no doubt David felt himself legally free to marry again. But David also took Ahinoam to be his wife and, when we think forward some years to David's stealing of Uriah's wife, we have to face the fact that in this area of emotional and romantic involvement David was vulnerable. The on-going story tells of many sad and ugly family complications and sorrows which may in great part have stemmed from David's relationships. We do not ignore the fact that at this stage of his life David was a hunted man and therefore a lonely man who would naturally long for the companionship and support a loving relationship would give. But David was also under strain and, as the issue with Nabal made plain, and emotionally tense. That does not seem to be the right time to be forming life-time relationships. This was also a significant stage in David's life in respect of his future service and that is a time to be careful regarding commitments which, although attractive at the time, may not in the long run prove to be true spiritual partnerships. It is sad when relationships and friendships which can be such a benefit and blessing become hindrances to spiritual growth and service. In the beginning, the Lord God brought the woman to the man and both knew that they were destined for each other (Gen. 2:18-25). In spite of that being a God-given, God-ordained relationship the woman proved to be the cause of her husband's fall. Whether we are thinking of a friendship or a marriage partnership (and they are two very different categories), the right and safe thing to do is to give it back to God for safekeeping. That is the way of blessing and enjoyment, and such relationships glorify God.

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25:36-44

It would be wrong if we did not draw attention to the solemn end of Nabal which was recognised by David as an act of God's judgment. David was relieved that he had been kept from taking judgment into his own hand. That is God's prerogative and He is the only one who can be trusted to execute it. All who are in God's service should keep in mind the promise of God in Isaiah 54:17, and the wise counsel of Rom.12:14-21. But consider godless, profane Nabal in his revelling and drunkenness, totally unaware of the danger he was in. Having scorned and rejected David, the Lord's anointed, he had not a single twinge of conscience, not a worry, not the slightest awareness of the significant spiritual issues being worked out. God was not in all his thoughts (Ps.10:4) and there was certainly no fear of God before his eyes (Ps. 36:1). Think of the human and spiritual burden on Abigail's heart, returning from David's presence and her own spiritual confession, to a situation in which it was obvious her husband had not missed her. Did she sleep that night or did she pray as she waited for morning and what she knew she would have to do? When the news was broken to Nabal it seems he had a stroke, struck with fear, and ten days later a further stroke took him away. To "explain" his death in this way is not in any sense to remove the thought of God's

judgment. Indeed David stated clearly that the decisive action was by God and that it was His righteous judgment on an evil man for his evil deeds (39). Our generation does not like to think about judgment or even punishment, but the Bible makes it very plain that what men and nations sow they reap, and there is no escape (Gal. 6:7; Hos. 8:7). Of course, for the penitent believer there is forgiveness and there is then no condemnation (Rom. 8:1).

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26:1-12

There is a great similarity between this story and that in chapter 24, both being concerned with the on-going enmity of Saul and the Ziphites towards David, a reminder to us of the persistence of evil. The apparently friendly parting in 24:22 had little significance and, while the events of chapter 25 were developing with such potential for danger to David and his work, the situation of this chapter was emerging. If we look back to 23:12 we find the men of Keilah ready to betray the man who had helped them and we begin to see the truth of the hymn we sing so casually at times, "Thou art in the midst of foes; watch and pray." Of course we must not think simply of human foes, for that same hymn speaks of "Principalities and powers, mustering their unseen array, wait for thy unguarded hours; watch and pray." There were people David could count on, his mighty men who would have done anything for him (2 Sam. 23:13-17) but there were those who had proved they could not be trusted and Saul and the Ziphites were in that category. However David was learning not to jump to conclusions and he made it his business to investigate (4). Why David then took the decision to go down to Saul's camp is not clear. Was he sure God wanted him to do this? Had he the clear intention of showing his superiority over Saul or was he seeking opportunity to show to Saul and his army that his motives were above suspicion? We must hold back from criticising David because we also do things without being sure about them. Two things are clear. David found himself faced a second time with a very real temptation suggested by his own good friend (8-9). The other clear truth is that God Himself watched over the situation and guaranteed David's safety (12). Do not fail to see David's trusting faith, leaving things in God's hand to be dealt with in God's time. It is best to think in this way before setting out on any venture.

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26:13-25

This passage is very similar to that in 24:8-22 but there are still lessons to be learned. In 26:10 David recognised that the evil life and influence of Saul could go on for a long time, and this is something we must recognise in our own life and work. Though our cause be righteous, our prayers earnest, and many indications be given that God has planned a good future for us, there may still be years of costly battle before the work is established. We see from David's actions that faith does not necessarily mean quiet submission, for he spoke to bring the issue into the open. But note how he kept a wise and safe distance between himself and Saul's bodyguard (13). Confident faith should never make us rash, and David was well aware of the unpredictable reactions of Saul. Even when defending his person and his work he took care not to put either in a vulnerable position. If we are foolish we can draw out and incite the enemy to onslaught and battle when the time is not right. David's exposure of Abner's incompetence and failure would rankle him and make him more of an enemy, "nursing his wrath to keep it warm", and this became evident in 2 Sam. 2:8-11 when Abner organised a "movement" to keep David from the throne. For the work's sake it is best to try not to make enemies (Rom.12:18), because the "fall-out" may land on others. David's words, intended to be heard by Saul, are a testimony that he was more to be trusted than the people Saul trusted and listened to. In v.18ff Saul's unreasonable hatred is exposed. David declared that if it were God who was inspiring Saul's hatred then let him tell exactly what the sin was and David would make an offering so that he could be forgiven. But if Saul was led on by evil men then it was time, more than time, for him to get right with God. Saul had to recognise the very real possibility that he was in fact fighting against God (Acts 5:33-39). That is a solemn thought.

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25:13-25

The picture given of Saul in 21-25 is full of instruction regarding spiritual counselling. There is all the appearance of penitence and change of heart and a desire to be accepted. There even seems to be a submission to the fact that David is indeed God's appointed king (25). But it all signified nothing more than a profound emotional reaction. It seems that the nearness of David, his manifest sincerity and grace, and Saul's memories of past blessings that had come to him through David, had the effect of a temporary melting of Saul's heart. He refers to David in very tender, affectionate tones (21) and with equal passion confesses, "I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly." David kept his distance, refusing to be beguiled by "nice" words, and the story ends with Saul going to his own place. There was no change of heart, no redirection of life, no fresh dealing with God. If we understand this whole incident as Saul being faced yet again with the grace of God in David and refusing that grace because of his hardness of heart, then we must see Saul going on into ever deeper darkness, more resolute than ever in his enmity against David. Saul had several spiritual "experiences" similar to this (19:20-24 was one of them) but they came when humanly speaking he was under pressure and circumstances were against him because he was acting against God. Difficulties can forge real faith (Jas. 1:2-3; 1 Pet. 1:3-7) and can correct us and lead us back to God (Ps. 119:67,71). But when the pressure eases and crisis no longer presses in, a man's real spiritual calibre and disposition come into view. It was so with Saul as the ongoing story will reveal. We do well to ponder Jesus' words in Luke 11:23-28.

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27:1

This reaction on the part of David is so unexpected, illogical and irrational and yet so real that we must ponder it deeply, refraining from criticism, and seeking to learn spiritual lessons from it. If this incident follows in strict sequence after the events of chap. 26 it is all the more astonishing because we have just read of David's strong confidence in God, leaving himself and his future in God's good hand (26:9-11). It may have been that on parting from Saul David was vividly aware that nothing had changed, that the enmity was as virulent as ever and that although he had six hundred loyal men, Saul had three thousand who could well guard and ambush every possible route David could take (v2; cf 26:2). The suddenness of David's decision, plus the fact that it was in his feelings that the surge of panic came, together with the fact that there is no indication at all that he sought the mind of God on the matter. Everything indicates that this was indeed an attack of the Devil, propelling God's man into a course of action with all awareness of God simply obliterated from his mind. Various factors may have contributed to David's vulnerability. Samuel, his spiritual mentor, had died. Jonathan his close friend was out of reach. He had been betrayed by people he had helped. He now had two wives who may have been urging a more settled way of life. A succession of battles had been fought and won and now the tension was eased but he had no assurance about long-term developments. Many a Christian worker has found that, when the chance comes to step down from "action stations", relaxation seems to have been accompanied by a vague emptiness and feelings become so bleak that all true assessment of spiritual achievement has vanished. This was Elijah's experience after one of his greatest achievements and he isolated himself from all human company just when he needed it most (1 Kings 19:1-4). David simply forgot the God who had brought him thus far and on sudden impulse set out on a road that was wrong.

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27:1-12

We all have to live with our complicated personalities and must learn to recognise and to know how to deal with our areas of vulnerability, because it will be in these areas that the Devil will generally attack us. Think of David. Stung by contempt he rushed to react against Nabal (25:9-13). When spiritually lazy and absent from his place of duty he was stirred by one spark of lust which led to the story of Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:1-5). As a parent, he swung from being indulgent to being over strict and caused the rebellion of Absalom (2 Sam. 13:30,38). In today's story, perhaps tired of endless battles and slander, he decided to get away from it all, assuming rightly that on hearing he

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was with the Philistines in Gath Saul would not bother him any more (v.1,4). The last time David had been in Gath he had been a popular hero but held in n contempt by Achish (21:10-15) so that he did not stay long. Now he was in Gath as an outlaw, hounded by Saul, but having a private army of fighting men whom the king of Gath recognised as a useful company of mercenaries. Remember, that in turning aside from God's way and will, David led astray his wives and his faithful warriors. People seldom backslide alone! And sometimes the leading backslider being a strong character finds it easier to return to God than those he led astray. That would be a solemn thing to have on one's conscience. For sixteen months David dwelt with the Philistines and he prospered, gaining a reputation among the godless who were persuaded by the evidences that David had turned traitor to his own people (12). The description of David's exploits here is that of a man of war with all his capacities devoted to the business of worldly conquest, and to such an extent that his testimony as a man of God was lost. He was successful, as the world counts success, but what does it profit if a man gains the whole world but loses his soul, his self respect and his testimony (Matt. 16:26)?

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27:1-12

It seems from the details of the story that David and his men waged war against the godless tribes of the territory (8) but reported back to Achish that he had been fighting against some of the tribes and areas of Israel (10). The ruthlessness of the warfare and execution was in order that no-one could report back to Gath and accuse David of fighting against the best interests of the Philistines. It may seem clever but it does not make us admire David, who was simply trying to make the best of a wrong situation which he himself had created. We must not excuse, let alone justify, the sins of the great men of God. Wrong is wrong and spiritually minded men, called to significant service, should know this. But we must not forget God, the God whose ways are past finding out and who works in the mysterious ways of His over-ruling, perfect providence. The Book of Chronicles gives a spiritual assessment of and commentary on the stories of Samuel and Kings and in 1 Chron. 12:1-2,16-18,21-22 we are told of how during this spell David gathered a mighty army, like the army of God. So far we have considered this chapter in terms of David's past and present experiences, but God was working towards David's future. In Israel, with David out of the way, it seems Saul's influence was making life even more harsh, with the result that ever greater numbers of men were defecting to David, preparing him and providing for him in respect of future battles. God does over-rule, and while this does not excuse our wrongdoing,

it does give tremendous encouragement. God is, and always will be, greater than all our sins and failures. Read Gen. 50:20; Acts 4:23-28. But remember that God's designs take time to work out and during that time, and perhaps more afterwards, we have the remembrance and the scars of the days of backsliding. It may be costlier but it is safer and surer to walk with God.

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28:1-6

We come to a chapter that is full of drama plus some considerable mystery. We spoke yesterday of the over-ruling providence of God and it is the power and activity of God that are the main emphases of the story. Both David and Saul were discovering that it is always God with whom we have to do (Heb. 4:13). God had a future planned for David, a future of service and blessing greater than anything David yet realised (Jer. 29:11). That new phase of service was drawing very near and God would bring David to it a wiser and better prepared man. But David still had to live with the complications of being out of God's will and he found himself having to be at the heart of the Philistine army to fight against his own people Israel. On the face of it David was not unduly worried (2), perhaps expecting to find some way out of his predicament. Time would tell. Saul also was in trouble. It seems that earlier in his kingship, no doubt under the influence of Samuel's ministry, he had expelled the wizards and mediums from the land because, as God's law had said, they had no place in the life of God's people (Deut. 18:9-14; Lev. 20:6-7). There is a suggestion in Ps.106:36-38, where similar language is used, that these occult practices desecrated or polluted the land. That is an aspect of present day "conservationist" enthusiasm that is seldom spoken of. There are

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more things than "acid rain" that pollute - lust, indulgence and wholesale abortion, to name but a few. But Saul had also rejected God, God's prophet Samuel and God's anointed king, David. In a sense he had turned his back on all the appointed "means of grace" but now, terrified by the size of the approaching Philistine army (did he know David's "crack" troops were there?) he prayed, no doubt for the first time for months if not years. He prayed but God gave him no answer. It was as if God was saying "Saul, you are on your own."

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28:7-14

When individuals or a nation turn away from God and shut their hearts against Him; or when through lack of true ministry, a nation is ignorant of God, His law and His Gospel; there is always a tendency to turn to the various forms of the occult, including horoscopes, ouija boards, tarot cards and "spirit" (not spiritual) seances and manifestations. People want help beyond what is human and yet they cannot pray to a God they do not know, do not believe in, and whom they have politely or impolitely ignored for years. Of course there will always be some who will rail at God for not being "available" for them when they decide He would be helpful. Saul turned to the very people he had banished in the name of God, knowing that some of them still practised in secret. There is something pathetic, almost grotesque, even laughable, about the king in disguise. Perhaps he thought it would conceal him from the all-seeing eye of God. No doubt he paid a bigger fee than usual because of the danger and the "consultation" proceeded. The medium was terrified, but Saul was cold as ice and pressed on with his plan. Keep in mind that Saul by now was aware that God would have nothing to do with him. There is no doubt that the Lord heard Saul's prayer but He refused to answer him. This is solemn but the truth must not be avoided. We are told to seek the Lord while He may be found (Isa. 55:6) and we are warned that if we persist in our sinful perversity God will not hear us (Ps. 66:18 AV). We have referred before to the stark realism of Zech. 7:13. If we say all these references are Old Testament, then go to Luke 23:6-9 and consider a silent Jesus. Herod had gone too far. His day of grace had passed.

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28:7-14

Note how vivid this whole narrative is. The woman reminded Saul of his earlier spiritual banishing of the mediums (9). Saul brushed this aside (10), taking the Lord's name in vain. He ordered the summoning of Samuel, as if the prophet was at his command even though in the world to come (11). The woman's fright seems to suggest she was aware she had nothing to do with the appearance of Samuel (12), and in fact she was not quite sure what she saw (13), referring to "a god" coming up out of the earth. Was it Samuel, in the same sense as Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus (Matt. 17:1-3)? Was it an impersonation, a devilish deception? Would the Devil speak the truth? Yes, on occasion (Acts 16:17)! Be quite clear the saints of God who have passed into the near presence of God cannot be disturbed by men or devils. If that were possible, salvation would be a mockery and our heavenly hope a fiction. Therefore if Samuel did appear it was God's doing, not the result of a witch's incantation. We believe in the supernatural. God sent angels to Sodom (Gen 19:1), to Zechariah and to Mary (Luke 1:11,26), and to Peter in prison (Acts 12:6-7), and God made Balaam's ass to speak (Num. 22:21-30). We must not be distracted or disturbed by the "mechanics" of the appearance. It was God's doing and, as we shall see, it was for judgment. There are always those who seek after the supernatural, feeling that somehow that is "superior" to ordinary experience. But Jesus' warning to those always seeking signs (Matt. 12:38-40) and His words in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31) are important. If people do not listen to God in and through His Word they will not listen even to a messenger from the dead. This was confirmed after the Resurrection. The unbelieving, religious people still refused to believe that Jesus had risen. Ponder these words from Shakespeare's Macbeth:

"What! can the devil speak true?

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"And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths;

Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence."

There are many people today who listen to the Devil under the impression they are listening to God.

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28:15-19

We must not think of this passage in any sense as teaching that there is communication with the dead. But it does remind us that death is not the end. We do not believe in annihilation. We believe that in the world to come there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked (Acts 24:15). There is a Heaven and a Hell, but we do not believe that the Devil rules in Hell. When we see and hear Samuel in this incident he is manifestly the same mighty spokesman of God as he was in all his life and we must conclude that he was sent by God to confront Saul and to speak a final word of judgment. Read again the story in Luke 16:19-31 and see how clearly Jesus says there is no coming and going between this world and the next at the request and certainly not at the command of men or women. But God in His sovereignty has the right and power to send His messengers in whatever way He chooses. Let it be said again clearly and solemnly that those who dabble in the "arts" of sorcery of whatever kind are dabbling in what is evil and they are in a realm when they themselves have no power. Read the fascinating story in Act 19:11-16. Turn now to the content of the passage and note the plain speaking of Samuel. There was no comfort for Saul, neither for his own personal well-being nor for the battle about to begin. In v.15 there is rebuke from Samuel because of Saul's deliberate attempt to interfere with the world of departed spirits. In v.16-18 Samuel simply says that none of this should be a surprise to Saul, because God had spoken these very things a long time ago, and at the root of all Saul's trouble was his deliberate disobedience. His day of judgment was pronounced and in the forthcoming battle Saul did die (1 Chron. 10:13-14).

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28:20-25

Saul was filled with fear after Samuel had spoken and obviously he had been in a state of tension, unable to eat all day. But, while there was fear building up into terror (and this is a common result of trafficking in the occult), there is no sign whatever of repentance in Saul. He had been given what he asked, information about what was going to happen, and it paralysed him. Here again is the danger of "fortune-telling" and the like. It does not necessarily help to know the future and at times it is psychologically, mentally and spiritually harmful and even destructive to think we know. Saul had to wait only until the next day, but what would it have done to him, or to any of us, to know that some disastrous thing was going to happen months or even years ahead? That would not help us to cope. It is a good thing to look back and to trace the good hand of God in our lives and to give thanks for the way we have been led, and for the way we have at times been kept in ignorance until we were ready to handle new situations and demands. It is reassuring to know that the times and seasons are in God's hands and that we are best not knowing the details (Acts 1:7). It is also comforting to be told that Jesus keeps things back from us until we are ready for them (John 16:12). It is far better to trust than to interfere or manipulate, whether in respect of our own lives or those of others. It is interesting to note that this whole event seems to have rekindled in this "professional" woman, whose trade must have made her callous, a new awareness of her humanity. Had she become aware of God in a new and personal way? Converts are found in many strange places. Is there not a hymn that says, "Down in the human heart, crushed by the tempter, feelings lie buried that grace can restore." It may have been so with the woman, but not with Saul. He was perishing and could not be rescued.

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29:1-11

We last thought of David trapped in the situation in which he was to be involved in fighting against the very people whose king he was destined to be. What we read here is how God in His sovereign providence rescued him from

his predicament. In 27:1 David had fled for fear of Saul, not realising just how near to the end of his life Saul had come. We would like to think that David was exercised in heart about the impending conflict and that may well be so, although his words in v.8 seem to contradict this. Was David simply covering up his true feelings or had he become so insensitive to God that he was indifferent? It is solemn and searching to think that a man with great service ahead of him can be so caught up in a complicated situation with an army that is set to fight against God. But God had his plans all set to send David back to where he belonged and, when these plans began to operate by means of the protests of pagan commanders, David had no option. It does seem to be suggested in v.6-7 that David had been a benefit and blessing to the king of the Philistines, just as Joseph had been a blessing to Pharaoh and Daniel to the king's court in Babylon. At this stage David was only being sent back to the Philistine base and the way back to the centre of God's will was yet to prove very costly. Thus far David was being spared the humiliation that others of God's servants before him had suffered when rebuked by pagan kings for their low level of life (Gen. 12:17-20; 20:9). It was out of experiences such as this present deliverance that David learned that his times were in fact in God's hand (Ps. 31:15) and that the issues of every situation belong to God (Ps. 68:20 AV). What we need to remember is that God's providence is creative and executive. It may not always be obvious but it is sure. Does not the Anglican Prayer Book speak of the silent working of everlasting providence? We do well when we pray, "I am weak but Thou art mighty, hold me with Thy powerful hand."

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30:1-6

At the end of the previous chapter we saw David being over-ruled by the Philistine king and sent away from the scene of immediate action. We are not told what David's thoughts and reactions were, nor do we know if David was at this stage aware of the fact that he was being dealt with significantly by God. What we do know from 28:19 is that Saul's reign as king was at an end and therefore David was at the most significant point in his spiritual career. At best David was confused; at worst he was unaware of and insensitive to the hand of God upon him. He needed to be jolted into spiritual awareness, not least to recognise the complications he had created for himself and for many other people. The shock treatment was about to be administered. After three days' journey (1), with no thoughts of impending disaster, they came to Ziklag and found the place in ruins and all the people carried away captive. David and his men were so shocked they wept till they could weep no more. To them it was total disaster. We may feel God's methods of awakening David to his spiritual calling were severe but we must see in this situation the amazing and gracious providence of God. If David and his fighting men had been in Ziklag when the Amalekites attacked there would certainly have been great slaughter in which many civilians as well as soldiers would have been killed. No one seemed to be thinking along these lines and we must note the very different reactions of the men and David. The people reacted against David and blamed him, and no doubt David felt responsible for what had happened, but David himself turned to God. This is an indication of his true spiritual character. The disciplines of experience and the awareness that he had failed not only as a private person but as a leader of God's people had the immediate effect of reaffirming his spiritual commitment. When there is this kind of resolution you know there has been repentance in the heart.

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30:7-20

David, being now right with God, shows again his spiritual decisiveness. There is no hesitation. He seeks the face of God for guidance, making it plain he has no desire whatever to rush on impelled by mere human reaction. He may have been stung and hurt by the criticism and accusation in v.6 but his sense of calling as the leader and shepherd of the people over-ruled his personal feelings. He was ready to bear the burden for his people, whom he knew were God's people before they were his. David went directly to God and he was answered directly by God. His recent failures and wanderings seem to have been swept aside out of the way so that they would not hinder. This is the marvel of God's forgiveness. When there is true penitence the Father of the Prodigal loses no time in restoring as well as forgiving. This does not mean that David promptly forgot all about his wrongdoing. There can

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be the residue of regrets and the memory of failure and what it has done to hurt others. But we must never allow such things to hold us back from going on with God for the sake of His work and for the blessing of His people. The thrilling thing here is seeing the real David, the man of God, recovering the spiritual freshness and vitality that he had lost. For a time it had seemed he had sold out all his spiritual commitment, being found living and working among the Philistines as if he had no knowledge of or desire for God. There is something very sad when people who have been vitally involved in God's work, and whose lives and prayers have had a drive and sweetness, grow cold, lifeless and graceless. Often such people claim they have not changed nor abandoned their loyalty to God and to His work, but the facts cannot be hidden. They have left and lost their first love; they are not the spiritual people their reputation suggests; and they have grieved the Holy Spirit (Rev. 2:4; 3:1; Eph. 4:30).

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30:7-20

There is no suggestion of guilt or blame attaching to the two hundred who were exhausted, just a recognition of their condition. Their tiredness may have been the result of long labour or of emotional distress because of the loss of loved ones. Whatever the cause, David recognised that the right thing for them was to stay behind and rest. This is a lesson many need to learn. It is not "spiritual" to drive on beyond a certain point of tiredness. Indeed it can be a form of spiritual pride which seems to assume that the work of God cannot survive without us. Even our Lord Jesus Christ stepped aside from the work in order to rest and He compelled his disciples to do the same (Mark. 6:31). As the story goes on we have the apparent "coincidence" of finding the Egyptian who "just happened" to be sick and was left behind. We must not be surprised at things working out so well. We can be sure that David, knowing he was in God's will, was looking for confirmation, help and guidance. He was full of expectation. After all, God is deliberate in all He does and in every situation He is at work for good on behalf of them that love Him (Rom:8:28). The whole venture was a success and everything, including the hostages, was fully recovered. In v.20 there seems to have been considerable praise for David and this stands in total contrast to v.6 when they blamed David for everything. Human nature, even among believers, is very fickle. Ever since the Garden of Eden people look for someone to blame(Gen: 3:11-13). When difficult situations arise it is best to reserve our judgment because we seldom know all the facts (1 Cor. 4:3-5). When we are out of sorts spiritually it is all too easy to transfer our personal discontent so that we blame and criticise others, often the very people to whom we owe most.

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30:21-31

This is a very revealing passage. Note carefully that it was David who saluted the two hundred men whose exhaustion had kept them out of the obvious battle. He knew how they would be feeling, having, as they thought, missed out on the victory. Perhaps most of them had been too worn out even to pray and when that happens the right thing to do is to rest in the Lord. Remember how Jesus told His exhausted close friends in Gethsemane to sleep on (Matt. 26:45 AV). They had reached and passed the limit of their capacity. David acknowledged publicly that these tired men were still his partners in the Lord's work, but others took a different view (22) and we begin to see that not all who are drawn into God's work are necessarily true in spirit. Success can sometimes expose people for what they really are, men and women of ambition who are more aware of "self" than of God. The attitude of these men was worldly, because they seem to have thought it was by their own capacities and effort that the victory had been won. This is never the case, and whenever we feel we have been spiritually successful (whatever that means) we need to remember that it is all of the grace of God and we have nothing at all to boast about (1 Cor. 4:7). David's words in v.23-24 make the situation absolutely clear and what an encouragement this should be to those who feel they are not significant and are not able to do the Christian things others can do so well. Those whose service brings them constantly into the public eye should remember that they may owe far more than they realise to the secret on-going faithful prayers of people who never in this world get any recognition or praise. Let us all guard our souls. There is more danger of pride if we are called to be in the forefront of the work and it is all too easy to make false assessments. We praise and give our attention to those we think are "spiritual" and may

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devalue or even ignore those who are of great value to the Lord. When we fail to honour those who should be honoured we are failing Jesus (Matt. 25:37-45). We need to guard our preferences. We can so easily make our likes and dislikes plain. James 2:1-9 should be read carefully, not restricting the words to mere cash and clothes.

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30:21-31

There is an important lesson about sharing God's blessings with others in the closing verses (26-31). Although these places mentioned had not taken part in the actual campaign, David recognised them to be part of his nation and, because in times past they had welcomed David when he had roamed among them, he wanted them to share in the benefits of the victory. In the earlier part of the passage David recognised that no active army can operate without the many people who work behind the scenes, doing inglorious work in supply and maintenance, and the same is true of a church. Never forget to value the people who do so much to keep things going, and who are seldom appreciated until they are no longer there and others have to begin to carry the load. In the later verses David makes plain that the work of God is wider than any one battle or any one area. This has to be recognised and it will save us from congregational preoccupation. Others labour as well as ourselves and our work is only part of the whole (John 4:37-38). We are bound together in the work of God with all those in every place who call on the name of the Lord (1 Cor.1:2). What we have to remember as individuals and as congregations is that when God is pleased to bless us then that blessing should be shared with others. We are in fellowship not in competition and it is only as all our separate works are fitted together that we see the glory and wonder of Christ's kingdom. David was aware that he and his people had received freely of God's goodness and therefore they should give freely to others (Matt. 10:8). Think of the time of great awakening and restoration at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, when God so blessed that the people could scarcely believe it (Ps. 126:1). Read Nehemiah 8:8-10. When did we last think about and pray for those who have no real gospel ministry to rejoice in? Have we become selfish, and even self-satisfied?

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31:1-6

Our story, which began with the birth of Samuel and ended with the death of Saul, covers approximately 60/70 years and has developed through many stages and complications. Many questions arise which are hard to answer. Why had the people of God lapsed so far from spiritual life and commitment? Why, after the great ministry of Samuel, did the people insist on having a king like other nations? Were they unwilling or even ashamed to be marked out as God's distinct people? Dare we criticise them when we are sometimes so slow to bear witness and to take a spiritual stand over against the ways of worldly friends and family? Why had Jonathan to die in war with the Philistines when he had been such a discerning and loyal friend and supporter of David? Did Jonathan realise his father's end was so near and that he would die with him? Did Jonathan wonder what had become of David? Away back in 23:17-18 Jonathan spoke words of faith and assurance but he was never to take his place when David was king. There are always many things we cannot understand, and things we do not need to understand (John 16:12; Acts 1:7). But we have the assurance that God knows what He is doing with us and that He will bring His purposes for us to their right fulfilment in this world and the next (Job 23:10,14; Philip.1:6; 1 Thess. 5:24). Do not fail to see the wonder of God's over-ruling in that David had been taken away from this battle (as the previous chapter has made plain) so that he was not in any way implicated in the death of either Saul or Jonathan. The king's death was tragic as his life had been. There was no last minute penitence as there was, for example, with Samson (Jud.16:28) or the dying thief (Lk.23:42). It was all very sad, but his chosen way of life had taken him progressively away from God. In the end God departed from him, and Saul knew it (28:15), and in that state of lostness he died. His life had been wasted.

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31:7-13

Some commentaries identify the site of the battle as the place of Armageddon. They describe the dispositions of the armies and the panic that so gripped Saul's men that they did not avail themselves of great opportunities for defence and rearguard action. Of course, all the human skill and courage in the world is of no avail when the hand of God is against a people. The reference to Bethshan indicates that the armies of the Philistines had invaded and virtually controlled the whole of Israel and we have to think of the powers of Anti-God and Anti-Christ seeming to be dominant. The ruthless and contemptuous treatment of the bodies of Saul and his sons indicate something of the darkness of the powers of evil, and on the face of it the situation for the land seemed to be even worse than it had been under Saul. Indeed, if the story ended at the close of this chapter it would be dark indeed. But we must not forget that already God's man David was in position and was now in a fit spiritual condition, ready to move forward in God's purposes. There would be powerful enemies to face and to fight, but that is always how it has been, is and always will be regarding the work of God in a fallen world. We fight against spiritual powers, and Jesus made it plain we would always have tribulation. But we are assured that the victory has been won (John 16:33). But note in our story that quite apart from David there was grace evident in the men of Jabesh Gilead. They did not close their eyes to the apostasy of Saul nor to the fact that God's hand was against him, but they still remembered the debt of gratitude they owed to Saul when he delivered them from terrible danger. They refused to allow the Philistines to hold the dead king in contempt and made it their business to give Saul and his sons a reverent burial. Perhaps at the funeral they thought deeply about what Saul could have been and how his life had been largely wasted. We do well to decide to live our lives as we would want to end them.

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