

For the past several weeks, we've read through several chapters of the book of 1 Samuel in the Old Testament. There are many themes throughout the book, but we quickly see the emphasis on TRUST and OBEY. The Bible characters are mirrors for us, so that we look at their lives and learn to confess our faults and ask God to forgive us. Confessing our sins is always important, but especially during this period of lent.

Hannah wanted children so much that she promised God she'd give the child to his service. So when Samuel was weaned he was taken to the temple and placed in the care of Eli the priest. It was at this time of history that Israel was in a state of decline, and Eli's sons had no respect for God, or his laws. As a father, Eli didn't discipline his sons, and so they brought disgrace upon the priesthood by their actions.

It is the same for us today when children are disobedient to their parents and teachers; they bring about dishonor to their families and communities.

Because Eli's sons were so disobedient, God chose Samuel to become a prophet in Israel, and he delivered God's messages to the people. When Israel went to battle against the Philistines, Eli's sons were killed, and upon hearing of the loss of his two sons, Eli fell backwards and he died, too.

By the end of chapter 4 we discover that Eli and his sons are dead and the wife of his son Phinehas has a boy she names Ichabod which means, "The Glory has departed from Israel," because the Ark of the Covenant is captured.

Before we cover chapters 5-20, keep in mind that the physical enemies of Israel were the Philistines. There were other groups they fought, but the Philistines were always a thorn in their side. From my understanding, Abraham and Isaac interacted with the Philistines, too. (Genesis 10:14).

Just like all nations, Israel had enemies. But their biggest enemy was sin. Over and over again the sin of disobedience to God's laws, and their unfaithfulness caused them to fall into the hands of their physical enemies. God did not honor them on the battlefield when they displayed their disobedience to him.

So in Chapter 5 of 1 Samuel, the Philistines took the Ark of God from Ebenezer to Ashdod. They carried the Ark into the temple of Dagon (their idol) and set it beside Dagon. The next day they found Dagon fallen on his face in front of the Ark of the Covenant.

So, they set Dagon back up and then the next day when they returned Dagon's head and hands were broken, and he had fallen on his face. But, that's not the only thing that happened. The people of Ashdod were afflicted with tumors. So, they sent the Ark to the city of Gath. Those people also were filled with tumors, both the young and the old. They sent the Ark to Ekron. Those people were panicked, since they heard that death and the tumors came to the cities of Gath and Ashdod, and they begged their rulers to send the Ark back to Israel.

Why do I love this story so much? It illustrates so many important truths. The Ark of the Covenant shows us how the presence of God works for the believing Israelites, and the unbelieving pagans. For the Israelites, the Ark was the place where once a year all the sins of the people were forgiven. God presence was power and blessings. For the unbelieving idol worshipers, like the Philistines, the Ark brought forth death and destruction. Think about the sacrament of the altar. It is only intended for those who love God and come in repentance. There is no power in the body and blood of Christ for those who come in unbelief, with stubborn hearts of stone. In fact, they are warned not to partake.

Believers come to the sacrament of the altar to receive forgiveness of sins and to be strengthened in their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are warned by St. Paul, however, not to come to the sacrament in unbelief, or with unrepentant hearts. "Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body," 1 Cor. 11:28-29.

The Philistines were pagans who somehow thought God's Ark would be a blessing to them. Instead, they received tumors and death. People can't steal God's blessings. He gives His blessings lovingly to his dear children of faith; those who love and trust in him.

In chapter 6, the ark of the Lord was returned to Israel. It was in Philistine territory for seven months. Remember, the area where the

Philistines lived along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The ark was sent from city to city until the Philistines realized that it was causing the tumors, and finally it was given back to Israel. But, Samuel had to remind the Israelites that God would not protect them in battle unless they put away their idols, and served only the Lord.

In chapter 8, we are told that Samuel is old, and that his sons do not follow the Lord. They were dishonest, they accepted bribes and perverted justice. How heartbreaking is that?

Samuel spent his life serving the Lord, and offering sacrifices in his faithfulness, and yet he had to be so disappointed that his own sons were not following the Lord. The elders of Israel demanded a King. Samuel knew that when the people insisted on a King, they lacked trust. After all, God was their King. Why did they need a earthly king to rule them? The people said that all the other nations had kings, and they wanted one, too. So, God allowed them to have what they wanted.

Sometimes parents will give in to their children's wishes, knowing that eventually the young people will discover that what they wanted was really not that good for them. When our son was little he wanted a Turtle billfold, and it cost five dollars. We let him buy it, but he was so disappointed because then he had a nice billfold, but no money. It was a good lesson for him.

Israel ended up with a King named Saul, and at the end of Chapter 10 some people were shouting, "long live the King," but others complained. Verse 27 says, "But some troublemakers said, 'How can this fellow save us?' They despised him and brought him no gifts. But Saul kept silent."

In chapter 13 we find that Saul is thirty years old when he becomes the King of Israel, and that he reigns for forty-two years. We also find out that Saul is impatient and doesn't trust God, and in his disobedience he decided not to wait on Samuel to make an offering to the Lord, but do it himself. He was fighting against the Philistines and instead of following God's law, he decided to make the offering because he didn't want to wait on Samuel. By the time we read chapter 15, Saul is fighting the Amalekites, and God tells him to destroy everything- their cattle, sheep, all livestock, all inhabitants.

Saul did not listen to the Lord, and saved out the fattest cattle and sheep, and everything he thought was good. When the word of the Lord came to Samuel about Saul's sin of disobedience, Samuel was troubled and cried out to the Lord all that night.

When Samuel confronted Saul he made excuses, just like we do when we sin. He said that they saved the best livestock to use for sacrifices to the Lord. Samuel didn't want to hear any more of Saul's excuses. He told Saul that "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams...because you have rejected the Word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king."

In chapter 16, Samuel anoints David as King. He was the youngest son of Jesse, and Samuel took a horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers. From that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power.

Now once again the Israelites were fighting their enemy, the Philistines. This time they had a champion named Goliath from Gath who was over 9 feet tall. (If Goliath lived today, I'm sure they'd sign him up for a team in the NBA)

Goliath mocked the Israelites, and every morning and evening he stood before them and taunted them. David took food to his brothers who were fighting in the battle, and when he heard about the giant and his threats, he wanted to fight him. Saul heard about David and sent for him. Then he dressed him in his own tunic and armor, but David took them off because he was not used to the heavy armor.

He approached the Philistine with five smooth stones and his sling. David came into battle in the name of the Lord of hosts. He depended on God to win the battle, after all, he was just a small boy. Likewise we depend on the Lord to fight our battles against the devil who is just as strong as Goliath, in fact the devil is stronger.

Psalm 44:3 tell us, "It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory, it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them."

Is it any different for God's people today? When the Devil mocks and taunts us, what is our response? Do we shake in our boots and run? Do we react like the other soldiers and tremble? Or do we pray?

When we face our enemies, we also come in the name of the Lord, and we trust him. That why in the Lord's Prayer, we always say, "Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven."

Sometimes God picks a scrawny little shepherd boy to fight his battles, and there is a reason for that. When the battle is won, then God's people understand that it was through God's power, and not through the power of his servant. That keeps us humble, because we understand that without God, we are weak and defeated. With his power, though, we stand like David, strong and triumphant over sin, death and the devil (our Goliaths). We have many Goliaths in our lives today, and turning to God in prayer will give us strength. We depend on God for everything, physical and spiritual. Just like David we rely on the Lord and not in our own strength.

In our next lesson we'll discover how David deals with the sin of temptation.