

1 Samuel

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[0 : 00] Father God, we thank you for bringing us together. We thank you for gifting us in different ways and for the chance to serve one another when we gather like this. Lord, I ask right now that you would speak, that it would be your words, and that as we look at these passages in 1 Samuel, that we would see you more clearly, and the result would be we would love you rightly.

Amen. Sometimes perception doesn't line up with reality. And this can be sometimes in good ways and sometimes in bad ways.

It could be that you are driving and your perception is that the gap is small enough for you to get through, and reality may not be that. It could be something more personal.

Your perception might be that you need to lose some weight to be attractive to other people, but the reality might be far from that. Perception and reality don't always line up, and that's a problem if it's true of how we see God.

If we are following a God who's more something that we've designed in our own mind, a version of God, if you like, than it is the God of the Bible, then we set ourselves up for a fall.

[1 : 10] In 1 Samuel, Israel has been told that judgment is coming as we work through these first four chapters, and we've seen the judgment in chapter 4 that we read last week and in chapter 4.

They've been told God's not happy, but if you get to just before the bit that Ali read out, at the end of chapter 3, even though they've been told judgment is coming, from where they sit, their perspective is a little bit different.

Everything still seems to be going okay. They're about to lose a significant battle, but if you just, the day before the battle even, they're living in the country they want to live in.

Hophni and Phinehas are eating well as priests. They've got lots of girlfriends, so they're happy with how things are going. Everything seems fine, and so they hear God, judgment's coming, but their perspective is, we don't actually believe you, because life's good.

And so their perception and their reality don't line up. Even though God's been revealing himself to Israel right throughout their history, instead of listening, they've kind of modelled their own version of him.

[2 : 19] They've come up with what they think he is like and how they think he should act, and what they've done is they've made him accountable to them instead of the other way around. They've kind of set what they think should be his agenda, and basically what they think God should do is whatever they want and when they want it.

So if they want protection in a battle, that's what God is required to do. If they want food or riches, that is what God is required to do. And the result, of course, of having that sort of a God is they shout with confidence when he enters the army's camp.

Even having lost battle, they get very, very excited. I remember when I was much younger, and I really emphasise much younger because this story's a little on the embarrassing side, much younger, I got invited to a formal with a girl that I kind of knew.

She was a fairly attractive girl, but I didn't know her very well, and so it struck me as a little bit strange that she had invited me to her formal. Now, the way my brain processed that was, I must be a pretty attractive guy.

Attractive girl asked me to the formal, I don't know her well, so she doesn't know if I'm funny or interesting or boring or arrogant, as the case was. So, my conclusion was, I must be attractive.

[3 : 35] Now, what this did was mean that I was very relaxed about the whole event. I thought, she's so into me that I don't have to put any effort into this formal, I'll just rock up. And so, the date of the formal came around, and so to prepare myself, aesthetically, I went for a surf.

And then I got out of the water about 20 minutes before I had to be at her house, went past a mate's place, picked up a suit that sort of fit, put a shirt on without a tie or a bow tie or anything like that. Didn't really feel like wearing leather shoes, so I put my just skate shoes on, on the bottom of the suit. I thought, well, you know, she's into me, so it's not going to be an issue. And I arrived at the front door of her house, thinking she's just going to be so excited that I'm here.

She's probably feeling really privileged, she's probably been counting down the days, she's probably got a calendar on a wall with crosses through it. And I walked in, and she kind of looked at me, didn't say anything, and walked into the next room.

And I discovered that she had spent three hours at the hairdresser, had a headache because her hair was a little bit too tight, was looking amazing in a fantastic formal dress and other things. And actually, she wasn't that into me, she just had a ticket, and the guy she'd asked couldn't go, and she thought, why not ask Sam?

[4 : 44] He seems nice enough. The problem when we have a false perception is that it leads to false confidence. If we have an understanding of something that is incorrect, we can set ourselves up for a fall.

And in the same way, Israel has this perception of God that He needs them, rather than the other way around. They've kind of figured out that God is somebody who is as much dependent on them as a country and on their army as they are a nation that's dependent on Him.

And so they set themselves up for a fall. And what God does in this passage is really important. It's more than just judgment on Hophni and Phinehas, which we looked at a couple of weeks ago.

We see the true character of God come out in these verses in chapter 4. God would rather be shamed. That's what's happening here. Even though we know otherwise, everybody who heard about this battle would have assumed that God lost.

It's what the Philistines thought. It's what the other nations around would have thought. God would rather be embarrassed than confirm Israel in their wrong perception of Him.

[5 : 54] He could have won the battle and everybody else would have continued to think God was great, but he was more interested in correcting Israel's wrong perception because God answers to no one.

He doesn't answer to Israel. He doesn't answer to you. He doesn't answer to me. And He has His own agenda. Just because we might think we know what God wants and we know when God's going to work or how God's going to work, He has His own agenda.

And it's been His agenda since the beginning of creation and it will be His agenda until Jesus comes back. It's this. God wants to reveal His glory and He wants to call people into a relationship with Him.

A right relationship, not a relationship where we invent what we think God is like, a relationship where we know Him and we worship Him and we obey Him. And if you're following a version of God that has more to do with what you think than it does to do with what God has shown Himself to be like, then on one level you're following a false God.

You could even say you're not following any God at all. And the problem with that is a false God or a fake God can't do anything for you.

[7 : 10] There's this scary but amazing passage in the New Testament where these people are really confident that they've been following God. They talk about the miracles they did in God's name.

They talk about all the good deeds they did and at the end of the passage Jesus says, get away from me, I never knew you. If you have a fake idea of God close enough is not good enough.

There's great confidence for those who know God and His power in their life. That's what we looked at last week. At the confidence we have with God's presence and power working through us. But there's only pain and frustration if instead of following the God of Scripture you're following some sort of God that you have control over, that you dictate to, that you instruct.

We need to look to the reality of who God is as He has revealed Himself not as we decide or we make up.

The first danger when perception and reality are different is that false perception leads to false confidence and false confidence leads to disaster. But the second danger when we have perception and reality that don't line up concerning God is the issue that the Philistines face in chapter 5.

[8 : 30] If your vision of God is not the real vision of God, is not true reality, then you will end up replacing God with a cheap substitute. The Philistines had a vision of God if you like, a perception

of Him which assumed that He had to defend Israel.

That was their understanding of how God's work. It's Israel's God so He's bound, He's like contractually obligated to win the battle for them. And so we know they had a dodgy view of God because just in the last chapter they figured they could beat Him just by manning up. So granting them a little bit of grace that they're not very sharp, they assumed God's Israel had to do certain things. They had an idea of how God's worked, they had an idea of how their God's worked and so they projected that onto the God of Israel and so when they win, for them that confirms everything.

Suddenly the God of Israel Israel is pretty weak because he's being beaten by their God. That's their process and so they bring the ark which represents God, they stick it in their God Dagon's temple almost like a trophy to show off how much better their God is.

Now the problem with having wrong perceptions of God is that when He doesn't live up to those expectations that we have which are wrong expectations, then we start looking somewhere else. [9 : 51] for somebody to meet those needs. But we somehow feel like we've been let down so we start looking for something or someone else that we can trust in and in the end we settle for something less than God, something less powerful than God, something that is actually unable to help us.

Now on one level I want to be sympathetic to the Philistines in this passage because our perceptions of God are not very dissimilar to theirs. When we started this series in 1 Samuel looking at chapter 1 we asked the question where is God when things go wrong in my life?

That was our starting point as we got into this book and it resonates for us because we know when things are bad we want to shake our fist at God and say fix it. Say this isn't fair. If you're God and you're good and you're powerful fix this.

When life is hard we're tempted to look for something else to satisfy us. We're tempted to find identity in the job that we have. We're tempted to be fulfilled in relationships or in significance or in money or in power.

When things aren't going well we sometimes think alright God you failed I'll find something else. And that is exactly what Israel does. Things have gone wrong and so the Philistines assume Israel's God must be even lower than their God Dagon.

[11 : 17] But look at how God responds in verse 1. After the Philistines had captured the Ark of God they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then they carried the Ark into Dagon's temple and set it beside Dagon.

When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day there was Dagon fall on his face on the ground before the Ark of the Lord. They took Dagon and put him back in his place. But the following morning when they rose there was Dagon fallen on his face on the ground before the Ark of the Lord.

His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold only his body remained. That's why to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor any others who entered Dagon's temple at Ashdod step on the threshold.

God's response to being put on par in fact being put under this God Dagon is that the people wake and find Dagon flat on his face. In fact this powerful victorious God Dagon needs his people to lift him up and put him back where he's supposed to be.

And just to make sure that we're really clear the next day he's not only on his face again but he has no hands and no head. God's making an example of this pathetic other God which literally hours earlier the Philistines would have been celebrating confident in.

[12 : 35] this Dagon is now headless handless and helpless. He has no power. He can't do anything he can't say anything and next to the God of heaven he's pathetic he's just a statue.

The God of the Bible is not like us he doesn't think like us he's not accountable to us and he doesn't always work in the way that we would expect him to but that doesn't mean he stopped working. It doesn't mean he has lost power it doesn't mean he's beaten he doesn't require an army to defend him he doesn't need to be put back in his place when he falls over he doesn't need his people to stroke his ego so that he knows that he's loved Israel's God our God needs nothing even without the army he is quite capable of defending himself look at verse 6 the Lord's hand was heavy upon the people of Ashdod and its vicinity he brought devastation upon them and afflicted them with tumors when the men of Ashdod saw what was happening they said the ark of the God of Israel

must not stay here with us because his hand is heavy upon us and upon Dagon our God so they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and asked them what shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel and they answered have the ark of the God of Israel moved to Gath so they moved the ark of the God of Israel now it basically cycles on issues bump it to the next town more issues bump it to the next town but I want to show you a couple of things really importantly Dagon had no head and no hands and straight away we hear about a God who does have the power to act did you notice that Dagon has his head and hands removed and in verse 6 the first thing we hear is that the Lord's hand is heavy upon the people of Ashdod the writer sets this up on purpose in one corner we've got headless handless Dagon the cheap substitute God and then on the other side we have Yahweh Israel's God whose hand is active and heavy and powerful in judgment on the Philistines the Philistines are even worried for Dagon now quick send God away because Dagon is struggling while this God is around God wins the victory that Israel can't he's not just a passive bystander while all this is going on he used the Philistines to bring judgment on Israel but now he's showing the Philistines what true reality is just as he would not give in to Israel's false perception he will not allow the Philistines to assume that they are more powerful than he is he will not let them think that Dagon is some great and mighty God and so true reality in the words of Hannah from chapter 2 there is no one holy like the Lord there is no one like our God all creation is his all creation answers to him and not by strength will one prevail when our perception of God doesn't line up with reality it's easy to settle for a cheap substitute when we put wrong expectations on God and then feel like he's let us down we are tempted to look for other substitutes but unfortunately wherever we look we get disappointed because all we find are headless handless helpless powerless cheap imitations if our perception of God is wrong then like Israel it starts to damage the way we interact with him the relationship gets distorted if God is somebody who needs my help then serving him as part of a ministry or church in my life obeying him becomes something that I do for his benefit as a favour to him because I'm just that kind of person if God is someone who needs my help then instead of trusting him with my life [16:44] I'll look after me and then once that's done I'll see what God needs but the reality of God is shown here again in this passage it's shown over and over through all of scriptures and throughout human history God is in control God is sovereign he is all powerful all knowing his love is beyond measure and he is good and anything that I offer to God any service any obedience is for my sake not for him anything that I do for God is a gift from him for me the opportunity to obey him the opportunity to know him the opportunity to serve him the opportunity to give finances all of it is a gift from God for me because our God needs nothing all creation is his already all creation will answer to him ultimately and so we must not let our perceptions block our view of the reality of God when we see who he really is we get released from these delusions of self importance and instead we can replace that with the joy of security in a God who is good and a God who is in control when perception and reality don't line up we get into trouble but that begs the question how do we focus on reality how do we avoid the perceptions which our society is filled with well let me suggest two things I'm sure that many of you are familiar with the story of Troy whether you're familiar with the mythology version or the Brad Pitt version doesn't really matter the point of it is that the Greeks are at war with the Trojans and the battle's been raging and raging and so the Greeks come up with a plan let's pretend that we've left let's leave this statue of a horse as like an offering and they stick some soldiers hiding inside it and the Trojans come down to the beach the next morning and think we've won we're fantastic let's take this statue up inside our city walls and celebrate this victory that we've had and sure enough that night the soldiers sneak out open the gates and the entire Greek army descends on Troy and destroys it two things when it comes to focusing on reality beware false victory just like the Trojan Israelites marched off into battle in chapter four assuming that victory was good assuming that victory was guaranteed because up to this point life was going fine up to this point nothing bad had happened and so they assumed that meant God endorsed the way they were living they assumed that meant everything was fine it's the same with the Philistines they win a battle against Israel and they assume that means Dagon is equally powerful with Israel's God but both times the victories proved to be false proved to be short-lived Israel's confidence is defeated by the Philistines and in turn the Philistines are afflicted by God beware false victories so often in our lives and in the lives of those around us we let our situation and our circumstance dictate our perception of God so if life is good that means God's good that

means God's happy with me if life's bad either God's powerless to fix it or he's not good or he doesn't care and so our situation dictates what we think God is like but learn the lesson from Israel beware of false victories don't let the situation dictate your circumstance there is another parable that Jesus tells in Luke 16 about a rich man and a beggar the rich man is wealthy and the story describes him as being someone who enjoys fine foods and fine things in all of his life and Lazarus is a beggar who sits outside this rich man's house begging for anything even the scraps from this rich man's table and to look at the two it would be easy to guess that maybe God is happier with the rich man than he is with this beggar even the dogs lick the sores of Lazarus and then it fast forwards to the end Lazarus sits in heaven with God and the rich man is in hell begging for relief God is good God is powerful and he is fulfilling his plan whether it looks like that to us or not his will of revealing himself and calling people into a relationship with himself will not fail no matter how it looks we must be careful not to be convinced by false victory even as Israel fails to be the instrument that reveals God to the nations around he is still revealed we finished last week with a sad conclusion from the woman giving birth that the glory has departed Israel just a couple of verses later we find that glory being revealed in the temple at Ashdod God reveals that he is still in control he is still more powerful than whatever else anyone may put their trust in regardless of how it might look

[22 : 17] God is fulfilling his plan and purpose and even in our world which denies that God is even there God will have his way even in a world full of wrong perceptions about God eventually all will see him all will recognize him all will bow before his majesty and his holiness how do we focus on reality we beware of false victories and secondly we look to the place where God has revealed himself we look to Jesus in Hebrews chapter 1 says that in the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways but in these last days he's spoken to us by his son whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe the sun is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being Colossians 1 the sun is the image of the invisible God

John 1 no one has ever seen God but the one and only son who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the father has made him known in Jesus you see God shining brightest if you want to see the reality of God there is only one place to look and that is where God has shown himself and that is in Jesus his power his love his righteous judgment his patience with sinful people his provision his faithfulness it's all on display in Jesus life and death on the cross now for everyone else the cross looks like the moment where God loses for the Romans at that point that was where they stamped out this annoying little sect that was starting up this new church this new religion for the Jewish leaders they finally got rid of the competition for Satan he thought he'd won as Jesus hung there dying it looked like God was either powerless or he didn't care but beware false victory in the empty tomb God is vindicated not even death can stop

God's plan not not soldiers not plotting politicians not rebellious people nothing can stop the will of God nothing can stop what he is doing and his will is that all might see his glory and honor him as God that is his plan that is his desire and the joy for us is that the reality of who God is far exceeds any perception that we might invent God is more loving than we hope God is more powerful than we imagine God is more in control than we can begin to understand our false perceptions of God fall so far short of who he really is the watered-down versions miss out on so much goodness and holiness and love and mercy if your perception of God doesn't drive you to your knees in humble dependence on his power while at the same time drive you into the air leaping for joy and singing with thankfulness in light of his unfailing love then look again look again at Jesus look again at the empty cross and the empty tomb look again at the risen Savior look again at God because the reality far exceeds any perception that we could invent far exceeds any vision we might hope for look again at

Jesus Father God we thank and praise you that you have chosen to reveal yourself that we don't have to guess at what you're like but God we want to confess that when things don't go our way when things aren't exactly the way we want them to be that so often we begin to doubt you God help us to see in Jesus the limitless love that you have for us help us to trust your goodness and your power and your sovereignty God if there are blind spots in our vision of you if there are things that are wrong about the way that we see you and the way that we love you and the way that we follow you show us Jesus help us to see you clearly so that we might love you as you deserve and so that we might know the joy that is only found in the one true God Father we thank you that in

Jesus we pray confident in Jesus we know that it is done in Jesus our hope is secure
Father open our eyes help us to look again Amen Amen God right Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen
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