

1 Samuel

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Preacher: Sam Low

[0 : 0 0] Father God, we thank you and praise you for your word. We thank you for the chance to gather around it tonight and we ask that as we do it that you would open our ears to hear what it is that you have to say. As Samuel prayed last week, we pray that you would speak for we your servants are listening. Amen. Sometimes privilege can become a problem. Sometimes you can be generous to somebody, you can be good to somebody and they can begin to presume on that generosity.

Being a father, I have been learning this very quickly. My son is quite a sharp kid. He learns very quickly what are things that he wants and what are things that he doesn't want.

And for some reason, he usually wants what I have. So I could have fed him like 10 times more food than he needs. But if I then walk out of the kitchen with a piece of toast, there is nothing more desirable in this world than that piece of toast. He literally eats more breakfast than I do already.

And yet when I go and get my toast, having fed him, he absolutely cracks it if I don't give him a piece of it. And the first few times I thought, oh, that's sweet. He wants to eat what daddy's eating. And so I'll be generous and I'll give him some toast. But he has begun to assume that now it is his right for daddy to give him toast. Unfortunately, it doesn't stop with food. My mobile phone is as much his as it is mine now. He's already figured out how to get on there and open up the photos and play videos of himself, which he thinks are very entertaining. But if I need to make a phone call, it's his phone, it's not my phone.

My generosity in giving him access has come back to bite me because now he thinks it's his right. Sometimes privilege can become a problem. Now, so far in the Old Testament up to this point, God has been very good to Israel. He has chosen them as a nation out of every other nation.

[1 : 5 6] He's rescued them out of Egypt. He's led them through the desert and made sure they had enough food and enough water. He now dwells with them in his temple. Now, there are a few instances of pretty severe judgment throughout the Old Testament, but they're always warranted. But as a rule, God has been good to Israel. Even when we opened the beginning of 1 Samuel a few weeks back and God declared judgment on Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, it's still wrapped up in goodness. The reason he brings judgment is because he wants to look after his people. And we saw in chapter 3 that that judgment was going to mean a better priest, a better priesthood. So God is being good even when he was judging.

And so finally, Israel will continue to enjoy the benefits of being God's people. They'll get to enjoy talking to God. They'll get to enjoy hearing from God, being protected from God, having a relationship with God. God has been and God is being good to Israel. He loves them. They're his people.

But that doesn't change how serious it is when they reject him. God has cared for them, but that doesn't mean that they have a right to presume upon his care. God has protected them, but that doesn't mean that they have a right to expect his protection. Now that God's word is returning to Israel, Israel must pay attention. So let's walk in to 1 Samuel chapter 4. The first word that God delivers to Samuel after a period of considerable silence is one of judgment. We looked at it in detail last week, so I won't go into it too much, but basically it's judgment directed at Eli and his sons. But we've got to be careful that we don't assume that everybody else was innocent. I don't know if you guys remember, it was probably close to a year ago now, there was the News of the World scandal out of England. And basically, it was a dodgy media organization that had been tapping people's phones without permission, listening in on conversation so that they could get leads, so they could get secret information to put into their papers and onto the web, which of course meant they sold more and made them look great.

And when they got found out, of course, the people at the top of the tree at News of the World got in a fair bit of trouble. News of the World owner, Rupert Murdoch, got in trouble, the managing directors got in trouble, and basically the leaders were held accountable.

But that doesn't mean that the people working in the organization didn't also share the guilt. It's only the leaders who were taken to court for their role, but what about the person who was taking the dodgy information and putting it into the paper? What about the person who was actually putting the taps on the phone so they could listen in? Just because the leaders are the only ones who face judgment doesn't mean that there isn't more guilt down the line. And we'll see as we go through 1 Samuel that although judgment comes to Eli and Hophni and Phinehas as the priests, there is plenty of guilt to be shared by Israel as a nation. Samuel's word was coming to all Israel. And that's not just a general statement there in verse 1. It's this word about judgment that all of Israel has heard. Everybody knows that God is unhappy. Everybody knows that God is angry. And what do they do as a response?

[5 : 25] Verse 1. Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines. They pick a fight. The first word from the Lord in a long time is God telling them he's not happy. And they think the best thing to do would be to pick a fight with the country next door. Now to be fair, this fight has probably been going on for a while. Israel and Philistine are both trying to take control of the same area of land. But having just heard that God is angry, the first thing they do is go over and fight someone else. Having just heard God's not happy with them, what would your first step be to annoy someone else? Now all throughout history it's been God who gives victory to Israel.

They've had some spectacular victories. They've won fights that they shouldn't have won. They've won battles where they were outnumbered, battles where they were scared. But right now, God is angry with them. Surely the first step for them would have been, let's get God on side, then let's go lay waste to these annoying Philistines.

But no, God's angry, let's just continue on and pick a fight. Remember, God destroyed the Egyptian army by swallowing them in the sea. Armies aren't a big issue for God. If God is with Israel, the Philistines are an absolute non-problem. But right now, he's angry with them. And they still go off and pick a fight. They need to deal with the bigger issue first. Because if God is with them, the Philistines don't matter. But right now, God is angry. So often, when I talk to people about Jesus, you hear things like, look, I hear what you're saying, but I'm just going to figure that out later on in my life. I've got a lot going on right now. Work is really busy. There's a lot of stuff for my family that I'm dealing with. I've got a lot of things to stress about. I'm trying to buy a house at the moment. But you've got to understand that your relationship with God, your relationship with the one who created you, is more important than any of these other things in your life. It's not to say they're not important. It's not to say they don't matter. But when you say, I've got to figure out which house I'm going to buy, and I've got to figure out whether God matters in my life, you've got to deal with the most important issue first.

Your relationship with the God who will judge you is more important than finding a job. It's more important than buying a house. It's more important than finding a husband or a wife, choosing or paying for your next holiday, even defending yourself against an invading army.

more important is your relationship with the God who made you and who you will answer to when you die. Now, it's not to say that any of those things are wrong or bad. Get married, buy a house, go on a holiday, do all those things. But don't let that be an excuse or a distraction when it comes to figuring out where you stand with the God who made you. It's more important. When you neglect the most important thing, inevitably these less important things, still important but less important things, will falter as well. Israel ignores God. They ignore what he has to say, or at very least they're more worried about the Philistines just over the hill. And so what happens? Verse 2.

[9 : 00] What happens? They lose. Badly. 4,000 soldiers die. This is God's people. This is God's army.

And they lose. 4,000 dads and sons and brothers die in battle. Now, what do you do with that if you're Israel? What do you do with that when you're supposed to be God's people? When he's supposed to protect you? When he's supposed to look after you? I mean, Israel has won battles before. Israel was a confident army because they had the God of heaven with them. It didn't matter who they were facing.

And then this happens. They lose. What do they do with that? Have a look at verse 3. When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, Why did the Lord bring defeat on us today before the Philistines?

Let us bring the ark of the Lord's covenant from Shiloh so that he may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies. Why did God do this? It's a really important question.

Notice that they don't ask, Who did this? Or they don't ask, Did God do this? They know this is God. They know that God's in control. They know that even though it's a loss, it's still something that God is responsible for. If you look closely at verse 3, it says, Why did the Lord bring defeat on us today before the Philistines?

[10 : 45] From Israel's perspective, even though the Philistines were the ones with the swords, it's almost like they were watching as God made Israel loose. They understand that God is in control.

And in fact, it's almost like he has made an example of his own people. But the question is, why? Why did he do this? And this isn't the first time.

This has happened before. Not very often. But it has happened and God has been behind it whenever Israel has lost like this. So why is the right question to ask? But they couldn't get the answer more wrong.

Have a look at verse 3 again. Let us bring the ark of the Lord's covenant from Shiloh so that he may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies. Let's go get the ark so that God will win.

So just walk through this logic with me for a second. We lost today, which means God wasn't there. Go get the ark of the covenant. Then God will have to fight for us because he's promised.

[11 : 51] It's like their answer to the question, why did God do this, is he must have forgotten. Doesn't he know that we're Israel? We're his people?

Doesn't he remember what he promised us? I mean, we've got it in writing. It's in the Ten Commandments. They're sitting in the ark where he says, you'll be my people, I'll be your God. God, look at the contract.

Bring the ark over and we will remind him what he's supposed to do as God. God, it's almost like something that I annoyingly do to my wife.

I am a big fan of back tickles. I don't like massages, but I like back tickles. And so I insist that she occasionally gives me back tickle vouchers.

Because usually the time when I want one is the time when she can't be bothered. And fair enough, because I ask most days. But if I have it in writing, I can wave it in front of her face and say, look, remember, you promised.

[12 : 48] It's almost like Israel gets out the Ten Commandments and goes, God, what are you doing? You said we have a contract from you. You must deliver. And so they figure out that's the solution.

And verse 4, So they bring the ark, they bring the priests.

Now Samuel's already told them that God's angry with the priests. In fact, the reason God had been silent up until the point when Samuel arrived, it's been judgment on Israel and their dodgy worship centered around Hophni and Phinehas.

And yet, somehow they think it's a good idea to bring them to the field of battle. No one thinks, even for a minute, that the fact that God is angry and the fact that they lost are at all connected.

There's been judgment. They've all heard it. That's what verse 1 said. Samuel's word came to all Israel. They've lost a battle. And for them, there's no possibility that those two things are related.

[14 : 05] It must have been that God forgot. Their privileged position as God's people has suddenly become a right. He has to fight for us. He has to defend us.

It doesn't matter what we're doing to Him. He promised. God has gone from being their creator and protector and sustainer, God, to some sort of machine that gets wheeled out when they need Him.

Uh-oh, we're in trouble again. Someone go get God. And make sure you bring the ark in case he's forgotten what he's supposed to do. There is so much wrong with this story that it's almost hard to know where to start.

I mean, they're trusting in two guys, Hophni and Phinehas, who God has explicitly said He's going to kill. And they've just brought them to a field of battle where the chance of death has got to be at least a little bit higher.

They have called on God as if they're the master and He answers to them. I mean, the whole priestly system existed to explain and show them what the right way to relate to God was.

[15 : 13] They were so unworthy of God that there were sacrifices they had to go through, that there were specially elected people they had to go through. And none of that seems to come in. There's no sacrifice.

And the only priests that they've got along with the ark are dodgy and about to get killed by God. And yet somehow, they feel entitled to His protection.

There is no reverence for God at all among God's people here. If anything, they're annoyed at Him. They feel like God's let them down. Forget what they've done. Where was God when they needed Him?

They just lost a battle. 4,000 men just died. I wonder if you ever do something similar in your own life. Do you ever get annoyed at God because you feel like He hasn't delivered on some entitlement that you've got?

Why am I still sick, God? Why am I struggling to pay this bill, God? Why am I still single, God? Where's my answer to prayer?

[16 : 19] And yet at no point do you reflect, even for a second, on the person that you're talking to? Or on the way that you're treating Him? Israel is asking the right question in this passage, but they come up with the wrong answer.

Verse 5. Forget what happened yesterday.

We've got this army covered. God has to fight for us. They get so excited that with their shouting, the ground shakes. Listen to the Philistines' reaction in verse 6. Hearing the uproar, the Philistines asked, what's all this shouting in the Hebrew camp?

When they learned that the ark of the Lord had come into the camp, the Philistines were afraid. A God has come into the camp, they said. Oh no, nothing like this has happened before. We're doomed.

Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They were the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. There's a bit of fear from the Philistines, but not really.

[17 : 30] I mean, what is it they're afraid of? A God? Or some gods? It's almost like they're not really sure. They've heard the rumours about Israel's God and what He did in Egypt, and that's impressive.

That's kind of a story that their great-great-great-grandfather told them. And so they're thinking, this God's kind of impressive. But this generation of Israel has failed so badly to show everybody what God is like, that the Philistines think that there's probably multiple gods.

Israel has brought in so many other extra gods, gods of fertility, and gods of rain, and gods of crops, and all these other gods that they could worship, that the Philistines, who are their next-door neighbours, don't even know that what's distinct about Israel's God is that He is the only God, that He is the one God, that He is above all other gods.

And so when the Philistines look, they're kind of scared, but they think, we've got gods. What's the difference between their gods and our gods? The Philistines are scared, but not really.

Listen to their strategy for fighting against God. Verse 9, be strong, be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews as they have been to you.

[18 : 47] Be men and fight. The Philistine battle strategy for fighting God is man up. I mean, does that sound ridiculous to anyone else? Surely our first step would be, if you're about to face off with the god who swallowed the Egyptian army with the sea, beg for mercy.

Put up a white flag and hope for the best. Surely doing a few extra push-ups in the gym between battles is not going to make the difference if you're facing the god who made the muscles on your arms.

But that's their strategy. Israel was supposed to be a light that shined the majesty and glory and power of their god into the world.

But it's done such a bad job that a few soldiers think that with their strength, they'll be able to overcome him. How far they are away from the prayer that Hannah prayed in chapter 2 when she declared that by strength man will not prevail.

No one in this passage, on either side, understands the power of God. Israel thinks they have control. The Philistines think they can beat God.

[20 : 00] And Israel's small vision of God has become all that the world gets to see. And so in ignorance, they go into battle again. Verse 10.

So the Philistines fought and the Israelites were defeated and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great. Israel lost 30,000 foot soldiers.

Israel loses badly again. 30,000 this time dead. And they flee.

Not for another battle. They've lost now. Verse 11. God's word is fulfilled.

Hophni and Phinehas both die on the same day exactly as God said would happen in chapter 3. And the ark, the symbol of God's presence with his people, the symbol of his promises to care for them and provide for them and protect them, is now captured by a foreign army.

[21 : 17] This whole episode is really about verse 11. The answer to the question, why has God done this? Why have we lost? It's because he said he would.

This is judgment. And to make it worse, this is judgment that God warned them about. Israel has completely misunderstood what it means to be the people of God.

They've misunderstood what it means to have a relationship with God. It's taken a gift and a privilege of being called into that relationship and it's become an excuse to treat God like he answers to them.

When God speaks, Israel should listen. When God spoke through Samuel, Israel should have heeded the warning and turned back to God in humble repentance.

But instead, they continue thinking, we're God's people. He has to be good to us. Their privilege and their position as God's chosen nation has become their downfall.

[22 : 23] They've lost sight of the God who chose them in the first place. What we've got to understand is that grace doesn't change who God is. God's mercy and God's goodness don't change the fact that he's God.

Don't change the fact that he is far above us. Don't change the fact that he is just and holy and powerful. I mean, he is their God.

He's committed to them. The commandments were a genuine commitment. The covenant he made is real. He does want a relationship with them. He does want them to know him. He is their God.

But he is still God. He's still the one who spoke the earth into creation. He's still the God who Hannah prayed to, who stands alone, who is unlike any other God, who breaks the bows of the mighty and raises up the humble.

He is holy and powerful and he will not tolerate sinful people. God reminded them when he spoke in chapter 2 and verse 30, it is far from him to tolerate those who dishonor him.

[23 : 38] He is worthy of more than that. Being in a relationship with God is not like any other relationship we have. If you dishonor a mate or a girlfriend or a wife, you know, you can give a bunch of flowers.

You can write a letter. But if you dishonor God, he's well within his rights to pour out his judgment on you because he is God and he made you. That's why the relationship between God and Israel has boundaries.

Those boundaries that God has given in the form of priests and sacrifices and the whole system is actually a gift for the sake and protection of Israel. It's out of love for them that God protects them from a judgment that they rightfully deserve.

That's why they have priests. God wants them to know him as their God, but they must understand that he remains God. He doesn't become less when he calls us in a relationship with himself.

He gives us a privilege of knowing him and he is still to be feared. If you call yourself a Christian, if you're following Jesus, you are in a unique and privileged position.

[24 : 55] God has invited you to refer to him as your heavenly father. He has welcomed you to talk to him and pray to him. He has promised to do good to you.

But you must remember he is still the God of heaven and earth. Yes, he has invited you to call him your God. But he is still a God who sits above all creation.

One thing is different for us. Romans 8 tells us that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Israel feared the judgment of God, but Romans 8 tells us that in Christ we need not fear it.

Jesus fulfills our end of the bargain. Israel was holding out the contract that God had made with him saying, God, you have to hold up your end even though we're not. But for us, Jesus is our end of the bargain.

The life that God expects of those who follow him is perfect obedience and service. And for us, Jesus fulfills it. The covenant cannot be broken because it is maintained by God and Jesus.

[26 : 12] Galatians 2 tells us that we have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer us who lives, but Christ who lives in us. When God looks at our lives, he no longer sees our imperfect attempts at following him.

He sees the perfect obedience of Jesus. What that means is, God will never say to me what he said to Eli.

God will never do to those who follow him what he did to Hophni and Phinehas on the battlefield. He will never kill them in judgment for their sins because Jesus has fulfilled the covenant.

But be careful how you hear me. Be careful that you don't hear this and make the same mistake that Israel does. That security that we have in Jesus, that confidence we have because he has done what is required, is not an excuse to treat God as less powerful or less holy or less sovereign or less important in your life.

His grace to you is that you get to know him even when you don't deserve it. But it doesn't change who he is. In fact, if you treat God like he's some sort of accessory in your life, if you treat God like he's an insurance policy for when you die and he has no impact on your day-to-day decisions, no authority in your life, chances are that the confidence you have that you're saved is false confidence.

[27 : 49] Because there's no separation between saying Jesus is my saviour and Jesus is my Lord. You can't have one half. Now, I'm not saying you need to be good enough for Jesus to save you.

But to comprehend who Jesus is as saviour, you must comprehend who he is as Lord. To understand what he did on the cross, you must understand that Jesus sits on the throne in heaven with all authority.

Only the King of heaven could die in your place and offer you forgiveness. When we are forgiven by God, a transformed life is the evidence.

Paul says it like this in Ephesians 2, verse 8. It says, It is by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not from yourselves. It is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast.

Nothing you do can actually enable you to have a relationship with God. It's a gift. It's his grace. It's his invitation. But there's a really important thing here in verse 10.

[28 : 59] It's the evidence.

The grace that God gives us isn't just about being given a ticket to heaven. That's part of it. But it's about being called into a relationship with our heavenly Father.

We are both children of God and servants of God. Not one or the other, not sometimes children and sometimes servants. Just as Jesus is saviour and king, we are forgiven and we are given the opportunity to serve our king.

Being a Christian isn't just about being forgiven. It's about having a relationship with God. Being forgiven is what gives you the chance to have that relationship.

But obedience and service is what the relationship looks like. Let me say that again. Being forgiven is what gives you a chance to have a relationship with God.

[30 : 09] And it's the only thing. Forgiveness in Christ Jesus. But obedience and service is what that relationship looks like. Not oppressive obedience.

Not burdensome service. But obedience to and service of the loving saviour who gave everything for you.

The question I want to leave you with tonight is, are you following the God who is both merciful and holy? Or are you just picking the half that you like?

Are you accepting the gift that God has given you? And embracing the life that he's prepared for you? Or are you trying to take advantage of a gracious God?

Let's pray. Father God, we want to acknowledge that it is easy to forget what it costs you to call us into a relationship with you.

[31 : 21] We want to admit that often we demand from you without acknowledging our failures in relating to you. And God, we want to ask that you would open our eyes to see you more clearly.

To see your power and your majesty and your holiness. God, we want to ask that we would wake each day excited and enthusiastic for the opportunity you give us to love you and obey you and follow you.

God, we want to ask that we would rejoice in the chance to serve and obey you as much as we rejoice in the forgiveness that you have given us. God, we pray that although Israel failed, we ask that as your people now that we would shine your glory and majesty to the world around us.

May they see the satisfaction that is in you alone. May they see your incredible worth. Father, we thank you for calling us into a relationship that we don't deserve and giving us the strength to stay in it by your Holy Spirit.

Amen.